

Museum News: The Flight of the Vin Fiz

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

One of the special moments in the life of our nation which Sanderson folks were privileged to witness was the first successful transcontinental "aeroplane" flight in 1911. Calbraith Rodgers flew a tiny Wright "EX" flyer from Sheepshead Bay, Long Island, to Long Beach, California, passing through Sanderson

Though the official flight ended at Pasadena, California, Rodgers' ultimate goal was to land on the beach and roll to a dramatic stop in the tide waters of the Pacific

Ocean. He accomplished his goal, but not without much trial and tribulation.

Rodgers suffered so many mishaps and crash landings that the only original parts of the Vin Fiz flyer was the vertical rudder, engine drip pan and one strut, to which had been tied a bottle of his sponsor's product.

Rodgers trained with the Wright Brothers themselves at their flight school near Dayton, Ohio, and soloed in only 90 minutes! As his career advanced he was attracted to a competition being sponsored by the Hearst newspapers offering \$50,000 to the pilot who could fly from coast to coast in only 30 days.

He found a sponsor in the Armour Company of Chicago, which was promoting a new soft drink called Vin Fiz. He would receive \$5 for every mile flown east of the Mississippi, and, galling to Rodgers, \$4 a mile over the area west of the Mississippi. "Jackrabbits don't drink Vin Fiz," the Armour Company contended.

The plane was decorated prominently with Vin Fiz advertising. As for the soda itself, one person said, "Tastes like a cross between river water (sludge) and horse slop." It flopped as a soft drink.

The Vin Fiz flyer was a diminutive version of the original Kitty Hawk flyer. With a wingspan of 32 feet and total length of 21 feet, it was powered by a 35-horsepower Wright 4-cylinder engine, driving two pusher propellers and with enough fuel to give 3.5 hours of sustained flight. Weighing a total of 903 pounds with the pilot, it could sustain 55 miles per hour, with no headwinds.

Leaving Sheepshead Bay on September 17, 1911, he flew up over Manhattan, found the Erie Railroad tracks and his special support train, and flew to Middletown, NY, a total of 84 miles in 105 minutes. The flight path went from New York to Chicago to Kansas City, then on to Texas and California, with numerous stops along the way.

But, on the second day, he crashed on takeoff and spent 3 days making repairs. That was to set the pattern for the whole trip. In about 70 landings he had 15 serious crashes and an untold number of less severe but time consuming mishaps.

Eventually, the Vin Fiz arrived in Texas and headed west, following the Southern Pacific tracks.

The Vin Fiz first set down in Terrell County for a short visit at Dryden on October 26, 1911. Continuing his journey, Rodgers landed in front of the Court House in Sanderson a few hours later.

The plan was to visit for a while and then continue the journey, but high west winds came up and prevented his take off for two days.

Sanderson citizen Carol Morris Glover remarked that when Rodgers landed he was so deaf that he had to communicate using a little black notebook and a stub of a pencil. The fact was, Cal Rodgers was hearing impaired



The Vin Fiz Flyer, pictured in an open field just east of the Terrell County Court House and Jail, on October 28, 1911, as it tries to depart from Sanderson after a two-day stay. The first attempt at take-off was not successful.

due to a childhood illness, making his feat even more remarkable. Glover remembered that Rodgers allowed the crowd to sign the wing of his craft.

The large crowd in Sanderson was very excited to see their first "aeroplane." They were just as intrigued by his support train, which consisted of six baggage cars and coaches.

The "hangar" car was painted white and adorned with Vin Fiz advertisements. The train carried spare parts, Rodgers's wife and his mother, who was appointed as special postmaster, canceling special commemorative letters along the way.

In addition, the train carried parts for two complete replacement aeroplanes, two engines, a Palmer-Singer touring car, three mechanics, a complete machine shop, representatives of the Armour Company and a contingent of press. He also carried a very complete first aid center.

Due to bad weather Rodgers and his wife spent October 27 enjoying Sanderson's social offerings. A group of men escorted Rodgers and his cohorts on a duck hunt using the Palmer-Singer for transportation, while Mrs. Rodgers amused herself by playing sets of lawn tennis on one of the local courts.

On October 28 the winds settled and Rodgers attempted to take off from a spot just northeast of the Court House, in front of the present-day Terrell County Memorial Museum. However, as had happened so many times on this trip he scraped a yard fence with his wing and had to set back down.

The Vin Fiz was easily damaged because it was nothing more than a pile of spruce sticks, wire and cloth. After replacing a wing panel, he took off successfully, circled the town once to gain altitude, and then headed west to Alpine for his next stop. The large crowd of spectators tracked his progress until the surrounding canyon walls blocked their view. Sanderson's first glimpse of manned flight came and went.

Rodgers completed the course in 49 days, landing at Pasadena on November 5, 1911, but was disqualified for the Hearst prize by exceeding its 30-day requirement.

Severely injuring himself in a mishap on that final landing, he went on to Long Beach a month later, after recuperation and on crutches, to finish his goal of landing on the beach.

Deducting the time spent for repairs and delays, his actual flight time was 82 hours and 4 minutes for a journey of about 4,321 miles. His average flight speed was 52.7 miles per hour.

Cal Rodgers predicted that in the future, aircraft carrying passengers would make the transcontinental trip in three days, but he would not live to see it. On April 12, 1912, Rodgers crashed another Wright aeroplane into the Pacific Ocean at Long Beach, apparently caused when a sea gull collided with his plane and tangled the controls. He was killed instantly. He was buried with full honors in Arlington Cemetery as our first aviation hero.

The original Vin Fiz was destroyed long ago (only three pieces, after all, were original after the flight) but an accurate reproduction created from the original spare parts passed through several hands and now hangs in the Barron Hilton Pioneers of Flight Gallery of the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, in the National Mall Building in Washington, DC.

This was only the first of many visits by pioneer aircraft over the years. In 1919 the 90th Aero Squadron, Flight B, and nine DH-6 De Havilland bombers from Eagle Pass were headquartered here for two years. Another first was the visit by an early helicopter/airplane called a gyrocopter that landed at the Dryden airport. And, at one point, even a dirigible was spotted in the skies over Sanderson. Once again, Sanderson's location on the railroad made it an eye-witness to a continuing parade of technological advances in transportation.