

## Vin Fiz Cover, PFC #225,000

by Michael X. Zelenak

*[Editor's Note: On March 16, 1990, 45 years to the day from when The Philatelic Foundation was officially chartered as an educational, non-profit institution, the PF issued Certificate No. 225,000. The patient which received the Certificate was a "Vin Fiz" airmail postcard. The item was judged to be genuine in all respects. This key item of U.S. aerophilately has a fascinating history which recounts the early days of air flight. It is fitting that this issue's "Cover Story" be devoted to the history and background of this scarce key item of U.S. philately.]*

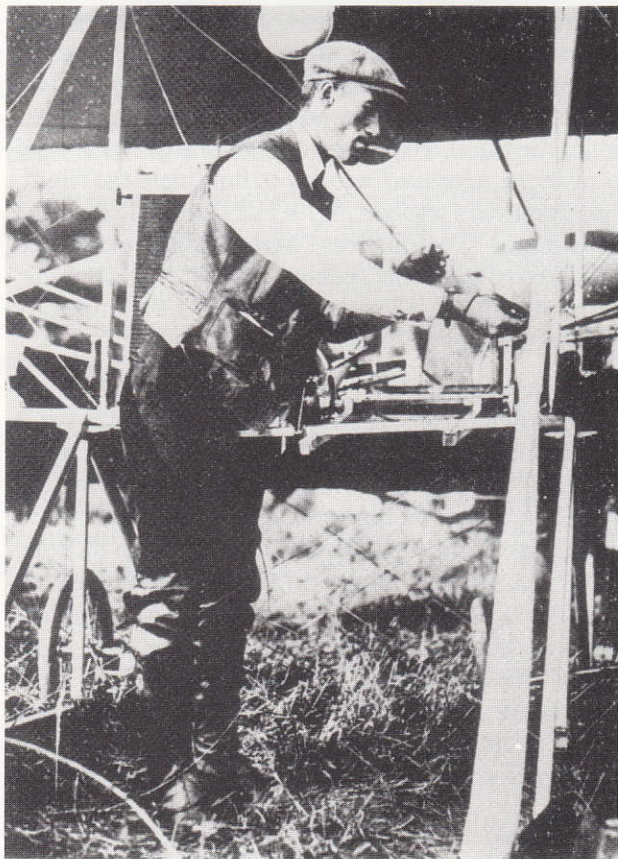


Philatelic Foundation Patient #225,000 was a postcard franked with a 25¢ *Vin Fiz* airmail label (Sanabria US # 2) and a one cent green Franklin head (Scott # 374), postmarked at Imperial Junction, California on November 4, 1911. The item was judged to be genuine in all respects. The *Vin Fiz* adhesive is a pioneer air mail semi-official stamp, issued for the first transcontinental flight across the United States by Calbraith Rodgers in 1911. "Vin Fiz" was a carbonated grape flavored soft drink manufactured by the *Vin Fiz* Company, a subsidiary of the Armour Meat Packing Company of Chicago, and it sold for five cents a glass. The soft drink manufacturer unwittingly entered the annals of aerophilately due to promotional efforts surrounding the first United States transcontinental flight. On October 9, 1910,

newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst had offered a \$50,000 cash prize for the first transcontinental U.S. air flight. The offer was good for only one year, and the entire flight had to be completed in thirty days.

It should be remembered that at this time many people were still very skeptical about the possibilities of the airplane, or "aeroplane" as it was known then. The Wright brothers' flight, less than seven years earlier, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903, had lasted only 59 seconds, and the plane had flown a scant 851 feet. In 1910, a transcontinental U.S. flight in 30 days seemed as daunting an enterprise as we might view a trip to Mars today. But early aviators were not known for either their timidity or modesty. One daredevil pilot, Calbraith Perry Rodgers, accepted the gauntlet of the Hearst offer.

Perhaps bravado and daring were in the blood of Cal Rodgers. He was a descendent of Captain Oliver Hazard Perry (Hero of the Battle of Lake Erie) and Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry. Rodgers had studied aviation with the Wright Brothers and was one of the first persons in America to own a Wright biplane. He accepted Hearst's offer and sought the financing to make the venture possible. The *Vin Fiz* Company of Chicago



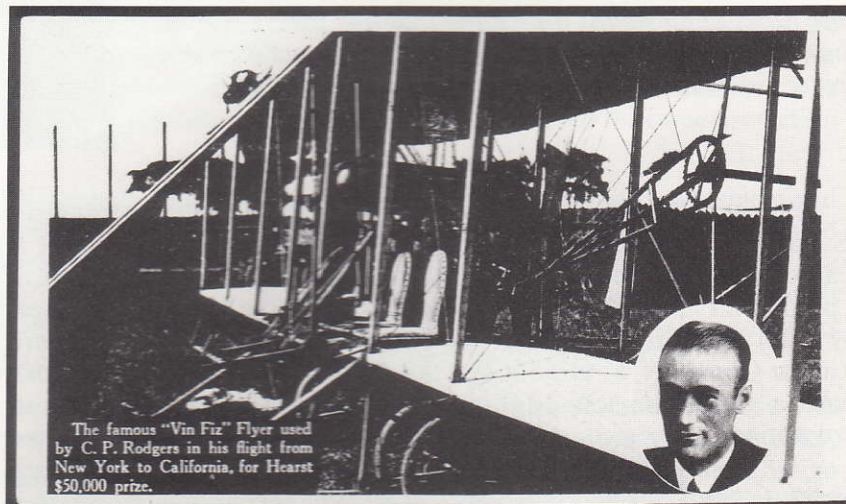
Cal Rodgers making adjustments to his aeroplane.



saw the promotional possibilities and came to the rescue with the necessary funding. The Vin Fiz Company, as Rodgers described the arrangement "agreed to pay my expenses en route, if I, in turn, would christen my aeroplane the Vin Fiz Flyer and have it publically known as such."

By the time he embarked, a scant three weeks before the expiration of the offer, Rodgers must have known that he could not win the \$50,000 prize. Many doubted that a transcontinental flight was possible in 30 days, let alone in three weeks. But a determined Cal Rodgers and the Vin Fiz Flyer departed Sheepshead Bay, New York on September 17, 1911. The Vin Fiz became the first plane to ever fly over Manhattan. A special train, also promoting the Vin Fiz soft drink, loaded with supplies and spare parts, followed the plane on its cross country venture. The rail caravan also included a backup airplane and automobile, a club car with a diner and a pullman car for Rodgers' mother, his wife, Mabel, and six mechanics. Rodgers encountered numerous obstacles, including several crashes, and he did not reach Chicago until October 8, two days before the deadline.

Obverse of the *Vin Fiz* post card, showing *Vin Fiz* flyer and Cal Rodgers.



Turning south, Rodgers pushed ahead with his historic flight even after the deadline passed, determined to prove that transcontinental aviation was possible. Even though the Vin Fiz Company had agreed to pay his expenses, repair of the airplane was Rodgers' financial responsibility. The numerous crashes and forced landings threatened the continuance of the flight. Here the proverbial woman behind the great man emerged from the wings with an idea to raise the necessary money to complete the flight. Sometime in October, 1911, (the first recorded cover is postmarked October 19, 1911 in Dallas, Texas), the "Rodgers Aerial Post" was established with Mrs. C.P. Rodgers as "Postmistress." Mrs. Rodgers explained the details and logistics of the operation: "Postcards delivered to me at the special train or the aeroplane, will be carried by my husband's aeroplane to his next stopping place for 25 cents. They will be stamped by me and delivered to the local postmaster who will send them to the person addressed."

No record was kept of the sales of these private semi-official adhesives, but they are among the most desired items to collectors of aerophilately. Ten copies are known to exist today: 7 on postcard or cover, 1 on piece and 2 unused. Rodgers did not savor his transcontinental triumph for very long. Set upon making his flight literally "ocean to ocean," Rodgers crashed trying to dip the wings of the Vin Fiz into the Pacific Ocean on November 12, 1911. He barely escaped alive, suffering broken legs and a broken collar bone. Upon recuperation, Rodgers's next flight became his last; he died following a plane crash in Long Beach. Few today remember the herculean achievement of this pioneer American aviator, but he lives on in the annals of philately.

#### Bibliography

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