

February 07, 1998

## Willimantic's First Air Mail Flight (2)

Willimantic printed a special commemorative "par avion" envelope to celebrate the "first air mail flight -- Willimantic Airport."

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MRS. W. BARDEN



The town of Windham was very proud of its new airport and airmail service, so it was time for a celebration. The celebratory program opened at 11:45 am on May 19, 1938 with a luncheon at the Nathan Hale Hotel sponsored by the Rotary and Exchange clubs and the Willimantic Chamber of Commerce. Guest of honor was airport builder Lieutenant Charles Nott,

state engineer for the Works Progress Administration, who was warmly welcomed by Willimantic Mayor Pierre Laramee, and Windham First Selectman William Buck. At 1:00 pm all assembled and joined a parade to the new airport. Justice George Hinman was parade marshal. Joe Tubridy, vice-president of the Exchange Club, and Chamber of Commerce President Albert Smith, accompanied him in the lead automobile.

The front formed at the Post Office, and stretched down High Street, ending on Valley Street. The "Wayne Norman" of this parade was a Mr. Nelson Flagg, attired as a frontiersman, riding a white horse representing the early pony express mail riders. Next came a band consisting of local postal employees, and a line of trucks to carry the mail to be deposited on the mail plane. Next came two more bands, the Willimantic Trade School Band and the VFW boys' fife and drum corps. The rear of the parade consisted of town officials and a group of visiting postmasters from neighboring towns. A feature of the parade was three-year-old Richard Arnold, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Arnold of South Street, attired as Uncle Sam leading a miniature mail truck. The CCC enrollees who were building the airport also took part in the parade. They were based at nearby Camp Fernow in Hampton. All local schools had closed at 1 pm so children could witness the parade to the airport. A crowd well in excess of 3,000 gathered at the airport. Hank Keene, a well known vaudeville act from South Coventry, landed at the new airport in his airplane as a part of a publicity stunt. He then followed the airmail flight to Hartford, carrying his own mail. American Airline officials had contacted Postmaster Lee to tell him that they hoped that the Willimantic plane would carry the famed nude fan dancer, Sally Rand, as a passenger. She was currently performing in Hartford.

Former Connecticut Governor John Trumbull owned the Willimantic airmail plane, a 220-horse power Stinson monoplane, and Fred Elser of Hartford piloted it. The plane flew above the parade, and then landed shortly after it had assembled at the airport. The entire route was patrolled by a squad of state policeman aboard motor cycles, and a number of area Postmasters, including George Robertson of South Coventry and William Hanly of Stafford Springs, arrived at the airport in "antique conveyances." Gerard Loiselle, vice-president of the Willimantic Rotary Club, conducted small ceremony before the mail was handed over to the pilot --- Loiselle (1902-1968), a prominent local businessman, was a founder of Radio WILI in October, 1957.

Willimantic Postmaster James Lee officially turned over the mail to the pilot, and the Stenson monoplane took off amid strains from the National Anthem. It circled above the city, and headed to Hartford to connect with American Airlines' Boston and New York mail plane, en route to Newark, N.J.

The mail consisted of 70 pounds of assorted items, including 2,418 pieces from Willimantic alone. Postmaster Lee predicted that within five years, some 90% of Willimantic's mail would be dispatched by air. The take off of Willimantic's first-ever airmail plane was perfect. The plane rose from the ground with the ease of a bird, but, much to the chagrin of many local young men who had gathered for the momentous occasion, Sally Rand was nowhere to be seen.