

## THE FLIGHT OF THE VIN FIZ

Of all the famous personalities, icons or characters that have become a part of the history of northeastern Oklahoma, none could claim to be the first to enter the state like Calbreith Perry Rodgers...on the front of an airplane. The 6' 4" Rodgers, proud owner of The Flier, recently purchased from the Wright Brothers, arrived over Vinita perched on a bucket seat in front of a 35 horsepower engine that was chain driven, connected to two pusher-type propellers. A biplane with wings and tail covered with fabric, The Flyer was state of the art, capable of reaching a top speed of 55 miles per hour. Few Americans had even seen an airplane and, when Rodgers landed his contraption in a field near Vinita during October of 1911, it created quite a sensation among the local population.

Thirty two year old "Cal" Rodgers, a wealthy socialite and grandson of Oliver Hazard Perry, naval hero of the War of 1812, was attempting to be the first to cross the nation, coast to coast by airplane. Publisher William Randolph Hurst had offered a prize of \$50,000 to the first aviator who could accomplish the feat in 30 days or less. Rodgers, a former football star, yachtsman and auto racer, purchased the plane and, after 90 minutes of lessons from the Wrights, had taken up the challenge.

His plan was to follow what pilots would later call the "iron compass," railroad tracks that by then crisscrossed the nation. Rodgers convinced Chicago meat packer Ogden Armour to sponsor him, and in turn, to advertise Armour's "Vin Fiz," a grape flavored carbonated drink, spelled out on the wings and tail of the aircraft. His plan also included a special train, consisting of three cars that would follow on the tracks of the railroad chosen to be the navigation route for the flight. Outfitted with spare parts, fuel, two mechanics, two assistants, and his wife and mother, the train proved to be a stroke of genius. When Rodgers finally reached his destination and, after numerous landings, most of which were either controlled or outright crashes, all that remained of the original Flyer was one rudder and a single wing strut.

Leaving a landing strip near New York City on September 17, 1911, Cal flew northwest across New York State following the railroads and avoiding mountainous terrain, then turned southwest, enduring a series of landing mishaps that slowed his progress. When he finally arrived in Chicago on October 9<sup>th</sup>, it was apparent that he wouldn't collect the \$50,000 prize, but with Armour's financial support he continued to pursue the quest. By the time he arrived in Oklahoma from Kansas City later in the month, the nation had become engrossed in his progress and problems. Cal Rodgers was now a celebrity, feted at each of his stops. This particular landing also marked what would become a personal record, the longest leg of his flight. Leaving Vinita, the crowd watched as he sat, perched on the front of the Flyer, legs dangling in the air and trade mark cigar in his mouth, lifting off and turning south.

Following the Katy Railroad, Rodgers flew over Adair, Pryor, and Wagoner, landing during County Fair week in Muskogee. Again celebrated by local dignitaries, he rested and repaired the plane, then continued to McAlester where, anticipating his arrival, local citizens laid out bed sheets to mark a landing spot. However, he didn't see it, and the welcoming committee had to scramble and regroup two miles away to greet him. Again

lifting off and continuing to follow the Katy tracks, the *Vin Fiz* exited Oklahoma, having traversed the state north to south. Crossing the Red River into Texas, the pilot would spend some time in the Lone Star state, landing 23 times before continuing on to New Mexico.

Traveling westward, still following railroads, multiple controlled crashes began to take their toll with Rodgers frequently in bandages and even a cast on one leg after an incident in Arizona. Despite what had become daily adverse situations, November 5<sup>th</sup> saw the *Vin Fiz* and Rodgers, both worse for the wear, arriving in Pasadena, California, welcomed by an adoring crowd of 20,000. Leaving Pasadena a few days later, determined to reach his goal, Rodgers flew the remaining 20 miles to the ocean although he was forced down twice, suffering a broken ankle on the second landing. Finally, on December 10, 1911 he taxied his plane into the surf of the Pacific Ocean. Cal Rodgers had landed and taken off 69 times, crashed at least 16, and traveled an estimated 4,000 miles in 84 days to reach his goal. Unfortunately, the intrepid pilot, first to cross the nation by air, would not enjoy his celebrity for long. The following year, on April 3, 1912, while flying along the coast near Long Beach, he flew into a flock of seagulls, the plane crashed and Rodgers was killed instantly.

Northeastern Oklahoma has experienced more than its share of hardy pioneers. Noted explorers, traders, gunslingers, lawmen and numerous distinguished citizens have proven to be icons of courage and endurance, their bravery unquestioned. But the thought of dangling their legs while sitting on the front of a fragile airplane, a thousand feet in the air while anticipating the probability of a controlled crash at 50 miles per hour, may have even given them cause for pause.







