

Wiley Post

The tail skid of the white and purple Lockheed Vega squealed onto the runway at Floyd Bennett Field, New York City. A crowd of 50,000 people surged forward in a body. Over the fence, through police lines, and onto the field they came, cheering and waving. Mounted policemen tried vainly to keep them back.



Wiley Post, farmboy from Maysville, Oklahoma, sat in the cockpit of the Winnie Mae and waited. He hoped order would be restored, but he remembered a similar scene two years before and knew the crowd would be satisfied only with a glimpse of the pilot. Tiredly, he opened the hatch and pulled himself up and out. The waving crowd grew more frantic and the cheering louder. Wiley could hear the cheers, but dimly. For once, he was almost glad of the temporary hearing loss he suffered from sitting so close to the engine of his airplane for so long.

For seven days he had straddled the roaring engine, long hours at a time and with only short snatches of sleep in between. He was almost totally deaf now, hearing sounds as loud as this huge crowd but little else with the use of his earphones. He knew from experience that it would probably be several days before his hearing returned, if it ever did.

Two years earlier, Wiley Post and Harold Gatty had flown around the world in the same dependable aircraft. Wiley was pilot and Gatty was navigator. Except for a three-week flight by the multi-man crew of a military plane some years earlier, no one had ever done such a thing, and certainly not in less than nine days! It was a spectacular event, but it gained little money for the adventurers and their backer, oilman F. C. Hall.

Worst of all, the sensationalism attached to the feat detracted from Wiley's real purpose, which was to prove to the public that flying was safe. Instead, he was branded a daredevil and was quickly forgotten.

Wiley dreamed of a commercial aviation industry that would carry people back and forth across the continent in large numbers or around the world in a short time. He dreamed of airports filled with passengers ready to go to all sorts of places for all kinds of things — a grandmother

going to California to see a new grandchild; a son flying to the bedside of his dying mother; diplomats going to the other side of the world to prevent war.

In 1930, when most airplanes flew an average of 135 miles per hour, Wiley Post sat in a hotel room in Burbank, California, and told a friend that one day aircraft would fly above the Earth's atmosphere and travel around the world in two hours. He risked telling only a few loved ones of the things he dreamed for aviation. On the rare occasions when he made his predictions public, people laughed. Around the world in two hours? Impossible!

America in the thirties was barely out of the horse and buggy age. Until they were grown, most Americans had traveled in wagons. In 1900, there were only 8,000 automobiles in the United States, and they were considered nuisances — expensive toys which scared the horses. A generation later, the automobile was the primary means of transportation, especially in urban areas. But America wasn't ready for air travel, especially not the kind Wiley predicted. Buck Rogers, an early science fiction hero, was born of the same kind of imagination, the public reasoned, and everyone knew he wasn't real. Only fools flew in airplanes.

Furthermore, the country was trying to work its way out of the Great Depression. Thirteen million Americans were unemployed. Few people had the price of a new pair of shoes, and certainly they weren't concerned about airline tickets. Fliers simply provided a free break in the monotony of Depression living — when families had the gasoline to get to the airfield (or pasture) to watch the stuntmen.

Wiley Post wasn't concerned with the economy, except where it affected his flying — and it often did. A poor man, he had to depend on other people or agencies to fund his projects. He frequently made postponements because of the shortage of money. Now that he was better known, however, he was better able to secure financial backing. His main concern was furthering aviation — making the public understand what aviation could do for them.

Perched atop his Winnie Mae, Wiley observed the public with quiet wonder. He was awed that so many people would come to this place to see him just because he had operated a machine that he considered absolutely dependable — just because he had spent a few days going around



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the world. What was it he had heard on the radio as he approached New York City? The biggest traffic jam in the history of New York! If there were 50,000 people at the airfield, he wondered how many hadn't arrived.

Mae reached the plane amid the circle of policemen who had fought their way through the crowd for her. Flanked by uniformed officers and a few close friends, she greeted her husband with a smile and a wave.

"Hi, Ma," replied the exhausted flier. But when he *extended* his hand to her, there was no tremor to expose that exhaustion.

The first request Wiley made was for a clean eyepatch. In 1928, while working as a driller in the oil fields, Wiley had suffered an accident, causing the loss of his left eye. The *workmen's compensation* settlement of \$1,600 provided the cash to buy the airplane for which he had been unable to save enough money, but for a while it seemed that he would never be able to fly. One-eyed pilots were not in demand because distance-judging requires the use of both eyes — or so many believed.

Wiley, on the other hand, found few obstacles too difficult. With great determination, he spent several weeks in the Davis Mountains of Texas at the home of an uncle and taught himself to judge distance with one eye.

Standing some distance away, he sighted a tree or some other object, made calculated guesses about its distance from him, then stepped off the distance to determine his accuracy. He spent hours daily at his task, until he had trained himself to judge distance with almost pinpoint accuracy. Later, he learned that he not only had perfected his judgment of distance but had improved the sight in his one eye to the extent that, of several Lockheed employees, his eyesight was the best.

Wiley had purchased a prosthesis, a glass eye to cosmetically replace his own eye, but he had found that the colder air in the upper atmosphere made the glass eye cold and gave him a headache. He had long since taken to wearing a modest white patch over the empty socket for comfort and convenience. Mae designed and sewed the patches for him, and he always had several with him. During the flight, however, he had accidentally left his suitcase in an airport somewhere on the other side of the world, and his eyepatches were in it.

Confident that he had plenty of patches with him, Mae had brought none, so he tied a clean, white handkerchief around his head instead. Then, he climbed down from his perch and made his way to a waiting

automobile. The New York City policemen fought to keep the excited crowd from crushing him.

Wiley Post was born near Grand Saline, Texas, the fourth son of William and Mae Post, farmers. They moved several times while Wiley was growing up, and he lived most of those years in Oklahoma, near Burns Flat and then Alex.

His first sight of an airplane was at the county fair in Lawton, when he was 14 years old. Art Smith, an early exhibition pilot with a Curtiss Pusher biplane, performed pyrotechnic displays at night. He attached Roman candles to his aircraft and did aerobatics.

From that moment, Wiley dreamed of flying. Except for 14 months spent at the Granite Reformatory for a youthful mistake in the 1920s,

he spent his life studying everything connected with aviation. He was among the first to notice “high winds in the upper atmosphere.”

One of the subjects Wiley studied was the sky. Not only did he read books, but also he carefully observed. He noticed that clouds moved at different speeds. The clouds lowest to the ground moved at a slow rate of speed, while those higher moved much faster. From this observation, he concluded that the winds were much swifter in the upper part of the sky.

Wiley Post dropped out of school after the eighth grade. He was restless in school and had no desire to attend or to do the work. He devoured books on aviation and its related subjects, however, and educated himself by study, observation, and experimentation. At his death in 1935, he was among the world’s most knowledgeable men in his field.

Post contributed *numerous* inventions and discoveries to the development of aviation. He was not credited with discovering the “jet-



Will Rogers and Wiley Post at Oklavik near Fairbanks, Alaska, just prior to the crash that killed them both on August 15, 1935. Will Rogers Memorial.

stream” (high winds in the upper atmosphere) until the 1970s, but he undoubtedly transmitted a great deal of information based on the truth of that find.

He developed techniques and used them long before science had heard of them from other sources. His technique of training himself to judge distance is today used as therapy and training for eye amputees. The method he used to train himself for staying awake for long hours by altering his sleeping patterns recognized principles not known scientifically at that time. He slept at different hours every day, and he walked and exercised before having someone check his vital signs. He was testing his endurance, and he recognized that fatigue might have disastrous effects if he wasn't prepared to handle it. No one else knew that then.

He developed and modified planes and their parts, adding speed and endurance to the life of an airplane. Perhaps his most significant contributions were the development of the pressurized suit and his high altitude tests.

Wiley believed, because of his study and observations, that if a pilot could endure the oxygen-scarce high altitudes to find the fast winds, he could fly at much greater speeds. In fact, on at least two occasions, by finding those winds, Post flew at speeds twice as fast as those for which his plane was designed. The wind propelled his aircraft, literally hurling it through the skies.

He knew the air pressure was too light in those higher altitudes, and he knew he couldn't pressurize the Winnie Mae's plywood hull. He decided, instead, to build a pressurized suit — a suit in which he could control the pressure and thereby fly in the upper atmosphere. He succeeded in making the suit with the help of the Goodrich Rubber Company and their engineers — and with a little help from the U.S. Army as well.

Frank Phillips, a longtime supporter of aviation and a pilot himself, furnished the backing for Wiley's atmospheric tests. Wiley and Mae moved to Bartlesville, Phillips's new home and base of operations. On two occasions, Wiley was certain he had broken high-altitude records, but both times recorder foul-ups robbed him of the recognition for it. Wiley proved to himself, however, that flying in those air channels was possible. This occurred only after considerable risk and at least one incident during which the pressure valve stuck, placing Wiley in extreme danger of losing his other eye.

Wiley Post was far ahead of his time. He made advancements and exposed details which later benefitted flying immeasurably, but few people understood them at the time that he revealed them. It was several years before the general public and the aviation industry reached his point of understanding. By that time, most people had forgotten that Wiley had pointed those things out first.

Wiley can truly be called the “Father of Modern Aviation” because of his inventions and discoveries. If he had not accomplished what he did, someone (or several someones) would have — sometime. But he did accomplish them, and he sought very little recognition. In fact, he wanted only recognition of information and acknowledgment that aviation was the hub of the future.

He was described as fearless, but he claimed that he simply knew what he was doing. He was repeatedly called a “stuntman,” and he resented that because it indicated that people didn’t realize what he was trying to do.

Indeed, he was not reckless, nor was he a stuntman, as evidenced by his behavior toward other things with which he was not so familiar. When he took Mae to an amusement park, she particularly enjoyed riding the roller coaster. Several times she rode the thrilling, fast-moving, unbearably exciting ride, and each time she urged Wiley to ride it with her. Each time he refused. The last time she asked, he replied indignantly, “No! I’m not getting on that thing. You’re crazy for riding it yourself!”

With that off his chest, he bought her a ticket and waited patiently beside the concession for her to return, hoping that if anything went wrong he would be able to save her.

This was a man who began his career by wing-walking and parachute-jumping. As Wiley reasoned, he was certain of the airplane,



**Will Rogers
and Wiley Post
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certain of the pilot, and most of all, certain of himself. With things he didn't know as well, he was much more cautious.

Wiley Post was acquainted with many celebrities, but the man he probably admired most was Will Rogers, another Oklahoman who backed aviation. An internationally famous writer and entertainer, Will often mentioned Wiley's exploits in his performances and columns. Will admired Wiley as much as Wiley admired him. The two of them planned a third trip around the world, this time for personal satisfaction and some private business.

The Winnie Mae was old and ailing, and Wiley, once again with too little money, bought two wrecked airplanes and had a hybrid model made from them — a beautiful, red Orion-Explorer. Wiley was not at home in this craft as he had been in the Lockheed Vega, but this was the aircraft that Wiley and Will Rogers boarded in 1935 for their trip around the world. When they reached Alaska, Wiley landed the amphibious vehicle on the water and asked directions of some Eskimos. The natives, anxious to be hospitable, urged the two famous men to eat with them. Wiley and Will complied, leaving the plane for the picnic. An hour later, they reboarded their airplane and started its engine but rose less than 100 feet into the air before the engine died.

Slightly nose-heavy, the plane dived back into the water, too close to the ground and moving too fast for its passengers to avoid being injured. The plane flipped over. Wiley Post and Will Rogers were killed on August 15, 1935, because of something Wiley had not learned in his study and observations. Some engines, when heated up, make condensate (or water) after they are shut off in cold weather. Water in the engine caused it to die and therefore resulted in the deaths of the two famous men.

Because of the economic Depression and its weight on the minds of the citizens, because he was too far ahead of his time and his contemporaries couldn't understand him, and because of his own lack of funds and, therefore, limited opportunities, Wiley Post received little from his flying except personal satisfaction. Even that lessened in his final days because of his inability to make the public understand. He died discouraged, planning to leave aviation for a few years and get into the mining business.

He explained that perhaps the world would be caught up by then and he could go on with his work. His work was ineffective, he reasoned, if no one understood it.

During the 1930s, Wiley Post predicted high-altitude flights, pressurized cabins, space travel, and sophisticated warfare. He predicted every *phenomenon* of aviation experienced today. He created and developed techniques, methods, and modifications which made today's aviation possible. He was fearless, yet cautious, and he was dedicated.

A gentle man, he bore a quiet strength that left no one doubting his abilities or his determination, yet he talked little of himself except when forced to by courtesies toward the press. He hated publicity but lived with it daily as a means by which to reach the people with his message.

He received little for his efforts except the fleeting admiration of a fickle public. After his death, his wife

sold his famous plane, the Winnie Mae, to the Smithsonian Institute for \$25,000. She "threw in" the pressurized suit for nothing. She purchased farmland in Texas, near Lubbock, where she died in early 1984.

Wiley Post, who was a farmboy with an eighth-grade education and who called Maysville, Oklahoma, his home, circled the world in a daring feat unequalled by anything accomplished before or since, with the possible exception of the first manned space flight. Wiley was entertained by presidents and celebrities. He was admired and envied, and he was hated and ignored. He endured hardship, pain, disappointment, and danger so that the people of the world might literally be closer together.

This farmboy from Oklahoma truly lived beyond his time. He was a pioneer of the skies and an explorer of the air. He lived his life to make everyone's life better. He was an Oklahoman.



Wiley Post is greeted atop the Winnie Mae at the end of his solo flight around the world.
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