

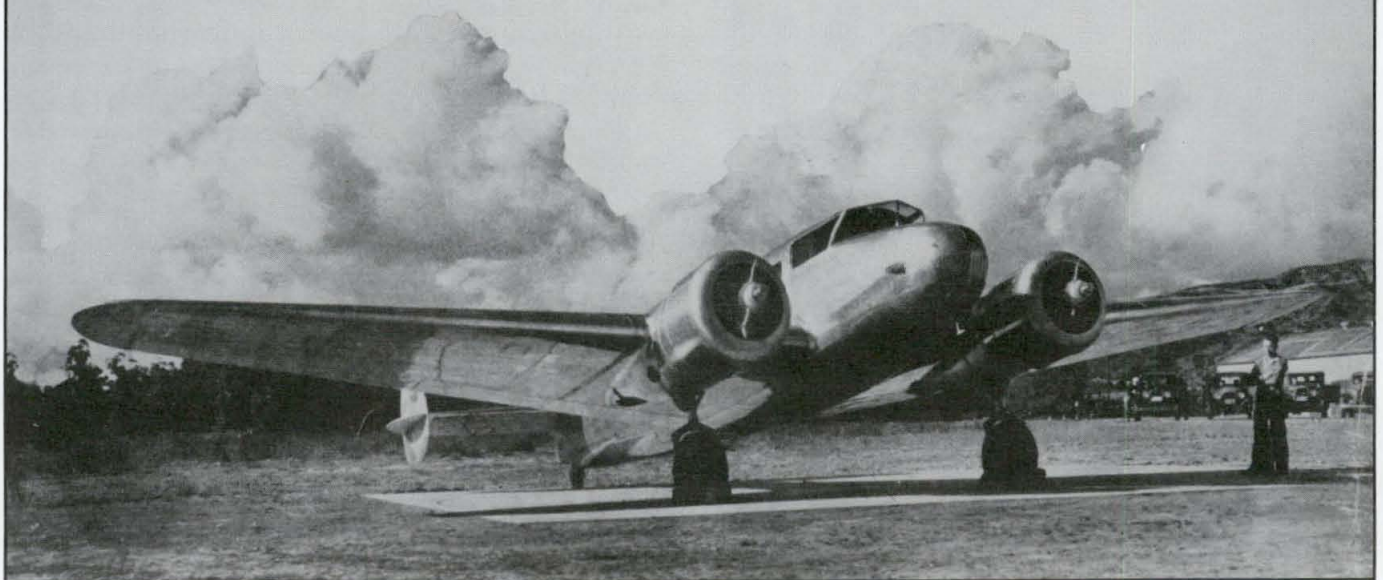
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Bismarck to Spokane Via Northwest Airlines In 1936: A Passenger's Memoir

Erling E. Kildahl

My brother had just telephoned me at the dry cleaning shop where I was employed part time. Somebody was trying to reach me and I was to call back immediately. He gave me the name and number and hung up. With some trepidation I dialed the long distance operator. I was making a person-to-person collect call to a Mr. Simmons at an unfamiliar number in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, a town in the panhandle area of the state where my parents resided. It turned out to be the telephone number of a law firm, of which Mr. Simmons was a partner, retained by Safeway Stores, Inc. The latter company was a rapidly expanding grocery store chain in the western United States with a thriving market in Coeur d'Alene in which I had worked part time while attending high school. Mr. Simmons requested my presence within a few days to be a witness for the company in a civil suit brought by a customer who had been injured while I was waiting on her. I had had nothing to do with her injury but I had been present, had witnessed the entire incident, and therefore my testimony was desired.

I was a first semester freshman attending Jamestown College in Jamestown, North Dakota. It was early December, 1936. I had enrolled two weeks late the previous September, and if I went back to Idaho, I wondered how an absence of several days, perhaps a week, would set with my professors. I had really just settled into my classwork and could hardly afford time away from my studies.

I listened to Mr. Simmons explain why he was so late in reaching me; how, when someone in the store remembered I had been present during the accident, he had won a brief postponement of the trial date. He had called my parents, he said, who had directed him to my brother George, the Woolworth store manager in Jamestown, who would know where to find me. As he

talked, the half forgotten event vividly came back to me.

During my senior year in high school, I had worked Saturdays, usually in the produce department of the Safeway store. In those days, produce was kept fresh and crisp by water spray. The spray was not always accurately directed onto the display cases and trays. The floor, surfaced with two-and-a-half to three-inch boards, received frequent soakings. Over time, those inadvertent showers caused the boards to rot and weaken, a condition that went unnoticed by the manager, or Gene Terway (my supervisor), or anyone else.

One Saturday in the spring of 1936, the inevitable happened. One of the legs of a fairly heavy customer broke through one of those rotted boards; her foot and leg, up to her calf, became wedged into that narrow aperture. We had trouble extricating her from the nasty trap, but, when free, she did not seem to be too badly injured. She accepted some free groceries and a ride home in the manager's car, after declining the manager's offer to bring a doctor to examine her. I did notice that she leaned on the manager on the way to the car. Over the following weeks I put the incident out of my mind. The floor was repaired and business went on as before.

The store patron, who, at the time of the occurrence, apparently was not too severely hurt, had later filed a suit for damages against Safeway Stores, Inc., claiming she had suffered grievous bodily pain and injury through negligence on the part of the store management. According to Mr. Simmons, I was the leading witness for the defense because I had been the clerk present when the accident occurred. I had seen clearly that her leg had penetrated the wooden flooring up to her calf. She now claimed that her leg dropped through the flooring up to her thigh but, Mr. Simmons said, the manager had told him the clerk and he, at the time of the incident, had commented on the limited extent of her injury. Was that my recollection? Yes, it was. That being verified, Mr. Simmons reiterated that I was needed to testify for the company.

I told the lawyer of my situation regarding my classes and that I could not afford to take time off to return to Coeur d'Alene. He appealed to my company loyalty; he assured me that Safeway Stores would pay all my expenses; and what, incidentally, did I think of the idea

The April 1934 Aero Digest featured on its cover the sleek Lockheed Electra 10A, a new airplane chosen by Northwest Airlines for some passenger flights in the midwest. This was the model of airplane in which the author flew just two years later in December of 1936.

— Photograph courtesy of George S. Batchelder

of flying home to save time? The trial was scheduled to be held in a few days and I was needed there in a hurry.

Mr. Simmons was a clever man. The idea of flying intrigued me, as he knew it would. Like most youngsters of my generation, I was caught up in the novelty and romance of flight. Nothing Mr. Simmons could have said to me would have been as persuasive as the suggestion that I fly home. Suddenly the importance of classes and studies diminished and my desire to be a witness at that trial grew. I was aware that Northwest Airlines now flew on a regular basis to cities in the west and the Pacific Northwest, extending its original base in the midwest. No doubt about it, the prospect of adventure in flying to Idaho won me to the cause of Safeway Stores, Inc. I agreed to come.

Mr. Simmons told me he understood my concern about missing classes and promised to get me back to Jamestown as quickly as possible. I told him I had no money. He would send money by Western Union. He would also, he said, arrange for my flight from the Spokane end, which he told me would be my destination. Spokane, in eastern Washington, is only a short distance across the state line from Coeur d'Alene. He assured me that Northwest would get in touch with me. I gave him the telephone number of the boarding house where I lived and told him I would be there within an hour. I did have the foresight to request enough money to cover all expenses at both ends of the trip and my fare back to Jamestown. I would return by train. With all these details settled, he thanked me and rang off.

I had much to do and little time in which to do it. First, I explained my situation to my employers who, having overheard much of my end of the telephone conversation, understood my position and kindly offered to help in any way they could. After thanking them, I hastened over to the Woolworth store to tell my brother of my plans. Finally I reached my boarding house where I telephoned the Registrar's office at the college. Luckily, I made connections with the Registrar, Dr. W.B. Thomas, who assured me he would notify my professors and that, as far as he was concerned, I would be permitted to make up class work I would miss during my absence. When these important arrangements were made, I packed a few things and waited for my expected calls.

Mr. Simmons acted very quickly. He called me within an hour and a half. He informed me I would not need any money. Northwest Airlines would take care of everything. Jamestown was not on the airline's schedule, so I would be conveyed with other passengers either to Fargo or Bismarck for boarding. All I would have to do, as I recall, was go to the Gladstone Hotel at a certain time that evening and check in at a desk the airline maintained in the lobby. Whoever was manning that desk, the lawyer said, would know what to do about me. The funds I required would be given to me when I arrived or when I needed them. I was not to worry about that;

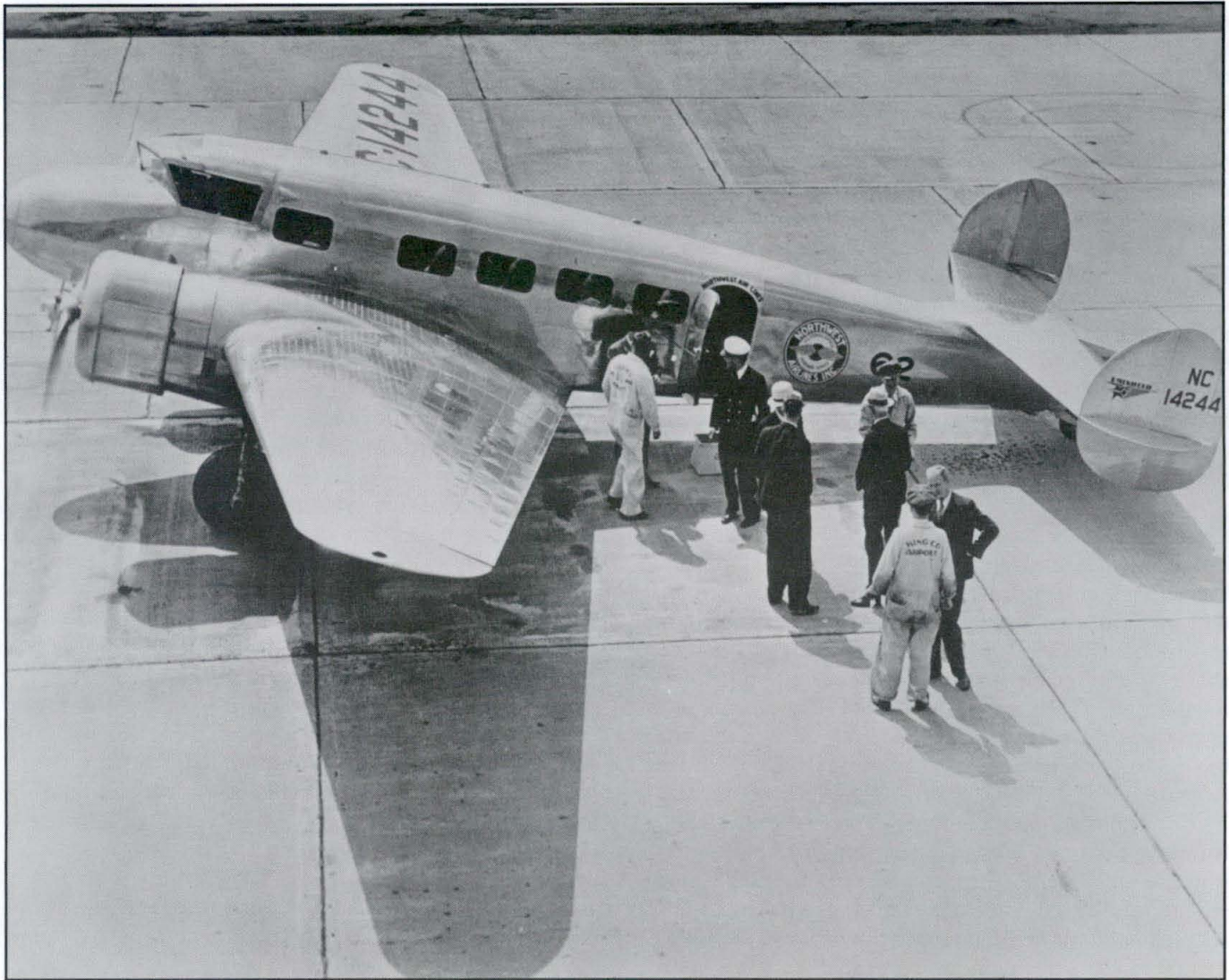
Safeway Stores guaranteed the money. Lastly, he told me I would be met in Spokane by my parents.

The weather was cold. I dressed in the warmest clothes I possessed, picked up my small piece of luggage, told my landlady I would be away for a while, maybe a week, and started toward the hotel. The timing was bad and I missed the evening meal at the boarding house. Fortunately I had a little money, which enabled me to get a bit of food at the hotel coffee shop. In the lobby, I found the airline desk and checked in with the young man on duty. True to his word, the lawyer had made my flight arrangements from the western end. The attendant knew about my situation and assured me all was in order. He told me there would be a waiting period, that I should sit down in the lobby, and he would keep me informed of developments. As I waited I had time to think about what lay ahead and what I knew about flying and airplanes.

I had been born and raised in Minneapolis, and while I was still attending Corcoran grade school, in 1927, a young Minnesotan from Little Falls,, Charles A. Lindbergh, had won world-wide fame by flying solo across the Atlantic. Immediately, airplanes and aviation assumed heightened importance in peoples' minds; everyone began to take flying seriously. Indifference and skepticism disappeared in a wave of enthusiasm. Many who considered themselves daredevils had taken short flights with barnstormers in World War I "Jennys" at state fairs and airshows, just for the thrill of it. At this time, a growing number of airlines were organizing, many carrying passengers as well as mail, and had begun spreading out across the nation. Landing fields were acquiring increasing status. Many adopted appropriate names, such as Wold-Chamberlain Field in the Twin Cities, named in 1923 for two young American flyers who were killed in action in World War I.

Northwest Airlines was just ten years old. I knew an older brother of a boyhood friend in Minneapolis who had been hired by the new airline in 1929, the third year Northwest carried passengers, and then primarily in the Midwest, between Chicago and the Twin Cities, with additional routes to Green Bay, Fargo, Winnipeg and Rochester, Minnesota. Only in 1933 had the airline begun flying passengers on a regular basis into the Rocky Mountains and Pacific Northwest.

As far as I knew, I would be the first member of my family to travel on a regularly scheduled, established airline. Air travel was hardly the common experience that it is today. Airline companies had ads for passenger travel in national magazines, but achieving recognition and acceptance by the traveling public was another matter. Passenger planes were noisy and drafty, airport facilities were primitive, and winter air travel, more than at other times of the year, seemed particularly risky and fraught with danger.



A Northwest Airlines Electra 10A in passenger service about 1935 at a King County airport in Washington, perhaps Seattle.

—Photograph courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

My thoughts were interrupted by the desk attendant who told me and two other passengers who had assembled, that instead of being taken to Fargo we would go to Bismarck for our flight west. Plans had been changed because of poor weather and visibility conditions in Fargo, whereas the weather was clearing to the west of us. In the meantime we were to continue to wait for two more passengers who were expected to arrive shortly, coming, I think, from somewhere east of Jamestown.

A station wagon or bus, I forget which, was brought to the Gladstone Hotel to take us to Bismarck, but we had to wait for our late arrivals to join us. Air travel in 1936 had a catch-as-catch-can flavor. Finally, after what seemed hours of delay, our fellow passengers arrived, had a bite to eat, and then the five of us with our luggage were bundled into the conveyance by our driver, and off to Bismarck we went. We would board an

airplane there, we were told, but some of us, by then, had doubts we would ever get into the air.

We arrived in the capital city quite late and were taken to a small building near the airport that was not very well lighted or heated. There were no ticket desks in sight. Up to that time I had no ticket or boarding pass, but that matter was corrected by a middle-aged man, carrying a brief case, who came around asking for me. After I identified myself, he sat down next to me and, removing materials from his case, made out a flight order that would get me to Spokane. After assuring me the fare was paid and giving me the ticket, he chatted on, dwelling upon the glories of air travel. I had by now acquired some grave misgivings. As I looked around at my fellow passengers, none seemed too elated at the prospect of flying at night toward the Rocky Mountains, and conversation was, at best, desultory.

Our group of very tired passengers had by now grown

to a total of eight, three more having joined our ranks in Bismarck. We were soon escorted outside by my cheerful ticket vendor, where an airplane awaited us, its motors warming up and making quite a racket. There we were greeted and assisted up a portable step into the plane by the co-pilot, one of a two-man crew. He was dressed, as was the pilot, in a natty Northwest Airlines uniform, and assured us our luggage was safely stowed aboard. As I entered the airplane, a twin engine Lockheed Electra 10A, I had to bend my head to one side to avoid the door frame. The 10A could accommodate ten passengers, so there was ample space for the eight of us and our miscellaneous carry-ons, even in our overcoats, which, though bulky, were needed in the chilly cabin. There was also, we were told, a small restroom for our convenience, located in the aft portion of the passenger cabin.

Seated and belted, we travelers were ready to go, even if the engines and crew were not. In a short time, however, after a few reassuring words from the co-pilot, and with the engines and propellers at their maximum revolutions, the airplane began to move. I had confused thoughts and mixed emotions as we taxied preparatory to taking off. There was a great deal of noise (cabins were not as soundproofed as they are today), which did little to stifle my forebodings of impending doom. With seat belts securely fastened, hands, white-knuckled, grasping the arm rests, and feet firmly braced, I felt the Electra move faster and faster on the runway and then lift into the night. Safely airborne, I began to relax, as I'm sure most others did in the passenger cabin. The co-pilot soon showed his smiling face and most of us, if not all, exhibited signs of relief. There were even a few reluctant smiles in response to the co-pilot's assurances.

It was well after midnight when we took off, and after my long, stress-filled day, I was exhausted. If we were to crash, I remember thinking, there was little I could do about it. I soon nodded off, too tired to dwell on the possibilities of disaster.

A sense of cold on my face, wrists, and ankles drew me awake. Huddled in my seat, still belted in and bundled in overcoat, scarf, and gloves, I became more acutely aware of discomfort and awoke. My first realization was of daylight, followed by the comforting awareness that we had come through the night without crashing. Only then did I notice the absence of sound. No roaring engines, no voices — silence! Hastily I craned my neck and released my safety belt, but I could see no one. As quickly as I could raise my stiff, protesting body, I stood and moved into the aisle and confirmed my suspicions. I was alone on the airplane. Just short of panic, I walked down the tilting deck toward the door I had entered the night before and looked out a porthole. I saw that the Electra was resting on an unpaved landing field, that there was a thin coating of snow on the ground, and the only sign of habitation was a hut some fifty yards away.

The small building sprouted a metal chimney, which was giving off smoke, and a radio antenna. This building and the runway were the airport facilities of wherever we had landed. Primitive as the shelter looked and was, it promised warmth and comfort.

My immediate thoughts were to get out of the airplane, step down onto the ground, and move over to that building. After a few moments of study, the mysteries of the airplane door were easily solved. I soon had it open and stepped down onto solid earth. The thin layer of snow was not difficult to walk on, and I started for the welcome signs of human habitation. As I neared the shack, the door opened and the pilot smiled a welcome. He told me I had been sleeping so soundly that he decided to let me sleep on, at least for a while. He would have come to get me in a short time, he told me. The warmth of the hut soon enveloped me and, as I greeted my fellow passengers, I was directed toward some rolls and hot coffee. I began to feel human again. Soon, oriented to having my feet on the ground, to being again among my companions, and enjoying the taste of food and coffee, I was told, in answer to my queries, that we were on a landing field near Helena, Montana. The city was a scheduled stop on our flight and we were ordered to remain here until foggy conditions in Spokane cleared off.

We had landed some time before I had awakened and left the plane. That meant, I assumed, that any mountains we had flown around or over had occurred during daylight hours since the morning was well advanced. I felt certain such a feat would have been impossible to do safely during the night. Such were my thoughts as we waited for the Spokane authorities to teletype an all-clear message to us in Helena. By the time we found ourselves in that shack, pilot, co-pilot, and passengers were on a first-name basis, all quite comfortable with each other. That camaraderie, quite unprofessional by today's standards, gave me a feeling of our being bound together in an adventure. I think the others in the group had a similar response and we were not far wrong; flying in those days was an adventure.

Toward noon, a message arrived that the fog enshrouding Spokane was thought to be dissipating. There was no assurance that it would be gone by the time we arrived in that eastern Washington city, but the message was good enough for the pilot and co-pilot. The former told us we would go, and he and his assistant proceeded to warm up the engines and the airplane's interior. We passengers had plenty of time to drink a final cup of coffee and ready ourselves to re-board the plane when the co-pilot gave us the word to do so.

In the 1920s and early 30s the phrase "flying by the seat of your pants" was heard quite frequently. Pilots, I think, were quite proud of their abilities to fly an airplane in all kinds of weather, with simpler technical and instrument aids than now, and arrive safely at their destinations. It was a boast originated by barnstorming pilots navigating and flying wood and canvas "Jennys."

Effective Sept. 1, 1936

NORTHWEST AIRLINES



West OF CHICAGO
GO THE
SHORT SCENIC ROUTE

A Northwest Airlines flight brochure highlighting routes "west of Chicago" for the year 1936, the year author Kildahl flew. Within are air travel tips surprisingly similar to those today.

—Photograph courtesy of H. Roger Grant

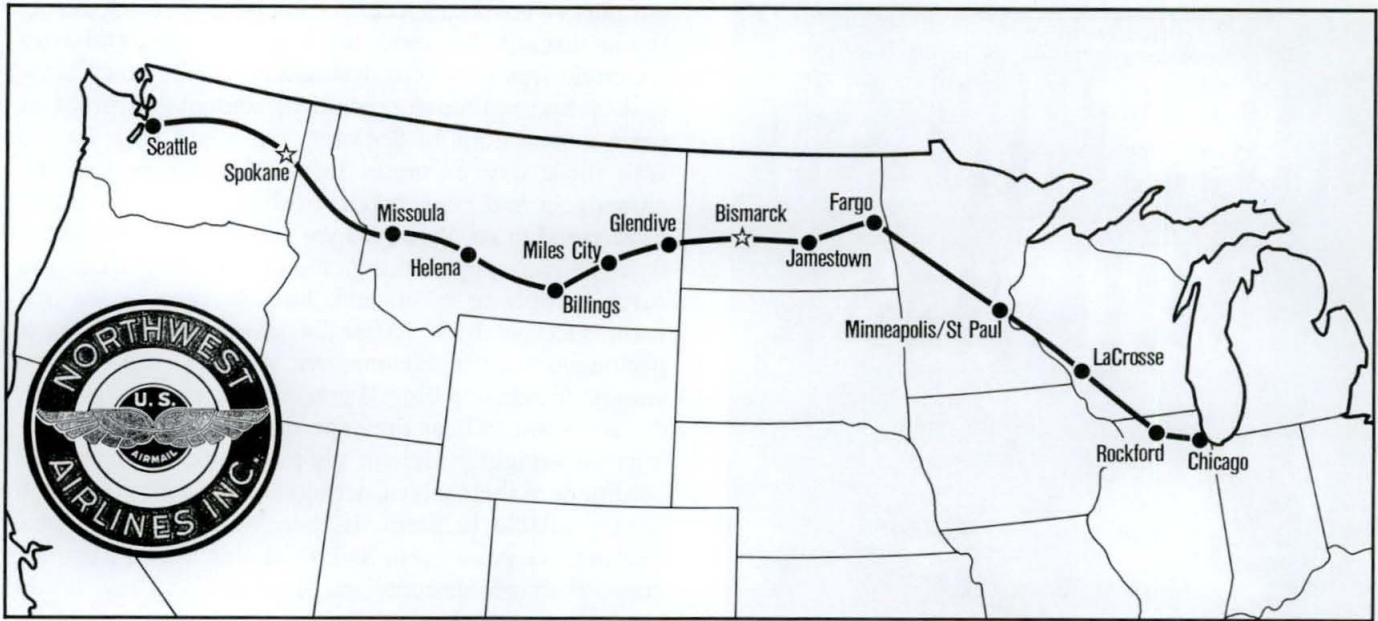
To some extent, the daredevil attitude implicit in that saying was still current in 1936, and probably influenced my thoughts. Despite the fact that aircraft technology had, in fact, advanced since those pioneering days, I felt

our pilots were taking a chance in taking off for Spokane, flying through the mountains in darkness, and with uncertain weather at our destination. On the other hand, if they had waited for positive, undeniable proof of perfect conditions in Spokane, we might have had to wait for a day or more. Ironically, if a poll of the passengers had been taken, probably all of us would have voted to go. What did we passengers know about flying? Practically nothing. We all had destinations to reach, people to meet, and dates to keep — we just wanted to "get there." After the delay occasioned by our prolonged stop in Helena, we were late and we all wanted to make up time, if possible; the airline, I'm sure, did not want to bear the expense of feeding and housing us overnight in Helena; the pilot and co-pilot seemed confident of themselves, acting on the best information then available to them. If there was danger in proceeding, we passengers had no choice but to trust our crew, their professionalism, their skills. They would minimize any risk.

The airplane warmed up and passengers summoned, we boarded, again buckled up, took off once more, and immediately, it seemed, were surrounded by mountains. Today, we fly over them in pressurized airliners and hardly know they are down there, thousands of feet below. But in December, 1936, our little twin motor Electra did not have a pressurized interior, it was not equipped with oxygen masks, it didn't even have an abundance of heat to keep us warm. Those conditions forced us to fly around high mountains, not over them, to follow rivers and valleys and to stay low where oxygen was plentiful. Even though it was a clear day, I imagine the pilots were kept busy navigating the plane.

The co-pilot did find time, though, to locate and distribute a box lunch to each of us hardy voyagers. I have no idea where they were stored or how and when they were brought onto the airplane. I do know I ate every morsel of food in my box (balanced on my lap), not having had any substantial meal since the day before. As we ate, we caught glimpses of superb scenery. It was quite a thrilling sensation to fly between huge mountains and look up at their snowy summits. I have no recollection of suffering from thin air when we crossed the Continental Divide, but I may have forgotten particular sensations. My overall memory of flying from Helena to Spokane is one of exhilaration. Flying, I thought, was fun. I could easily have become addicted to the joy and the speed of it. That feeling diminished a bit as we approached Spokane, after flying through Idaho's Mullan Pass, the western gateway for aircraft flying into and out of the northern Rocky Mountains.

Spokane, we were told, was still socked in with fog. The skill and experience of our crew was to be put to the test. We seemed to be flying through cotton, and I realize now that our pilot had some sort of guide to help him descend through the fog in exactly the right direc-



Map by Brian Austin.

tion and make a perfect landing. I am no expert on aviation, but I am sure "seat of the pants" flying would not have done the job. He had a compass and altimeter, of course, and was homing on a radio beam. He may have had some help from the ground, not apparent to the passengers. Whatever means he and his associate employed, they were eminently successful in landing the airplane on the runway.

We had made up a portion of the time lost in Helena, but we were still behind schedule. After the plane stopped rolling, and we had taxied to the unloading area, we left the faithful Electra. I went to the small building that contained the ticket office and waiting room of Northwest Airlines. It was somewhat better than Helena's facilities, but primitive by today's standards. The landing field that was dubbed an airport was located somewhere on the edge of the city, and I think my parents had difficulty finding it but they were there, patiently, though nervously, waiting for me. They told me they were happy to see me get off the plane. They put me and my bag into their 1929 Model A Ford and off we went to Coeur d'Alene, a trip on U.S. Highway 10 of about thirty-five miles.

After a meal of home-cooked food, I had a good night's rest in my own bed under my parent's roof. The next day I went to meet Mr. Simmons in his office, to be briefed on the trial that was scheduled for the following day. I also saw Gene Terway and the store manager. Mr. Simmons asked me to tell him, in my own words, exactly what I had witnessed when the customer fell through the floor. I described the event as precisely as I could recall it. When I finished he told me not to change a single word. What I had recounted, he said,

was the obvious truth spoken by an eyewitness and my testimony should, in his opinion, decide the case in favor of Safeway Stores. Then Mr. Simmons played devil's advocate. He tried to trick and rattle me, to make me change my testimony, to contradict myself; I stuck to my story and he didn't succeed in shaking me. Finally satisfied, he told me I would do, had me sign some papers, receipts for plane fare, train fare, and incidentals, and instructed me to be at a certain courtroom in the Kootenai County courthouse at a specified time on the morrow.

The plaintiff was suing the grocery chain for \$25,000.00, for compensatory and punitive damages. The combined testimony of the manager, Gene, and me was decisive, as our attorney had foretold. The lawyer for the plaintiff tried a number of ploys to rattle me and change my story, but he did not succeed. It was not a jury trial, and after all the testimony had been given and pleas made by the attorneys, the judge wasted no time in pronouncing judgment. The plaintiff was awarded \$1,500.00 to compensate her for her medical expense and inconvenience and the case was concluded.

Those first two days in Coeur d'Alene had been devoted to legal business and the trial. The temptation to remain at home for the Christmas holidays was very strong, but that would have meant missing another week or ten days of classes. I knew I would never be able to make up the lost class time. I did, however, stay over one day to visit with my parents and see a friend or two.

The previous September my parents had taken my brother and me down to St. Maries, located at the southern end of Lake Coeur d'Alene, to catch a freight train on the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific

Railroad.* That was my mode of travel to Jamestown, some 1,200 miles east, to enroll, tardily, in college. Three months later, I was traveling again by train to Jamestown, but in an entirely different manner.

After saying goodbye again to my parents, this time at the city depot, I boarded a local Northern Pacific train that ran on a spur line between Spokane and Coeur d'Alene. (None of the three northern transcontinental railroads' main lines were routed through the latter city.) I reached Spokane in plenty of time to transfer to the eastbound North Coast Limited that would get me to Jamestown in about forty hours. But what a difference from my last journey east! This time I traveled in style: Pullman, dining car, club car, the whole works, courtesy of Safeway Stores, Inc.

Life at college had kept on its steady course. Hardly anyone had missed me during my absence. (Not surprising. After all, I was a lowly freshman.) I soon caught up with the class work I had missed, got back into the swing of my part-time work, and life went on, as usual.

Looking back over the years, I realize I had a thrilling, and in some ways a pioneering, trip west in an airplane, participated for the first time in a civil suit, and

had a first-class return trip to Jamestown on a crack train. These experiences had provided me with a stock of vivid memories. In return for all this, I had given Safeway Stores my testimony. All in all, I think it was a fair exchange. ND

*See "Riding Freights to Jamestown in 1936: A Brief Memoir," *North Dakota History*, 55-1 (Winter, 1988): 14-24.

Erling E. Kildahl, Professor Emeritus of Theater and Speech Communication, Purdue University, taught courses in both areas and directed or acted in more than 100 plays between 1948 and 1981, the year of his retirement. He has had numerous articles published in speech and educational theater journals as well as one in *Journal of the West*. This is his second memoir to appear in *North Dakota History*. He lives in Orlando, Florida.

An Afterword

by Donna M. Corbett*

The American air transportation system began in the mid-1920s, with two important pieces of legislation: the Air Mail Act (1925) and Air Commerce Act (1926). Through this legislation, the federal government established systems of regulation that protected passengers and enabled well-managed airlines to flourish. Hard economic times in the 1930s, however, took their toll on airline companies. Many disappeared, through merger or collapse. Those that survived form the foundation of some of today's airlines.

Northwest Airlines, the carrier on which the author flew, was founded in 1926 with passenger service the following year. The year of this memoir, the airlines had just celebrated its tenth birthday. In the words of its general manager, Croil Hunter, "In the life of transport aviation, ten years is a ripe old age. In fact, when you are ten you are a hoary old pioneer!" This pioneering airline, today the nation's oldest, had operating revenues of \$1.6 million in 1936. By 1938 it had flown over 63,000,000 passenger miles without a single passenger fatality.

The aircraft, the Lockheed Electra 10A, is considered a "modern" airliner, technologically far advanced from the wood-and-fabric airplanes with which the airline industry began service a decade earlier. Like its contemporaries, the Douglas DC-2 and DC-3, the all-metal Electra incorporated many refinements such as electrically operated wing flaps, hydraulic brakes, retractable landing gear, and two-way controllable propellers. Its sleek and streamlined appearance was considered the epitome of 1930s stylishness, evoking the speed and power of the newest form of transportation.

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