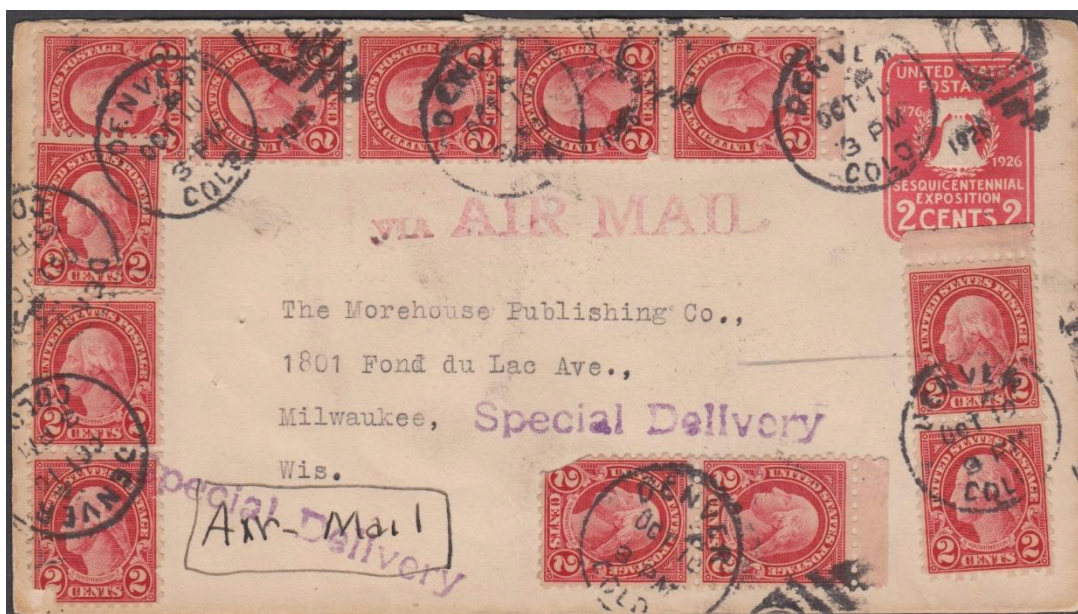
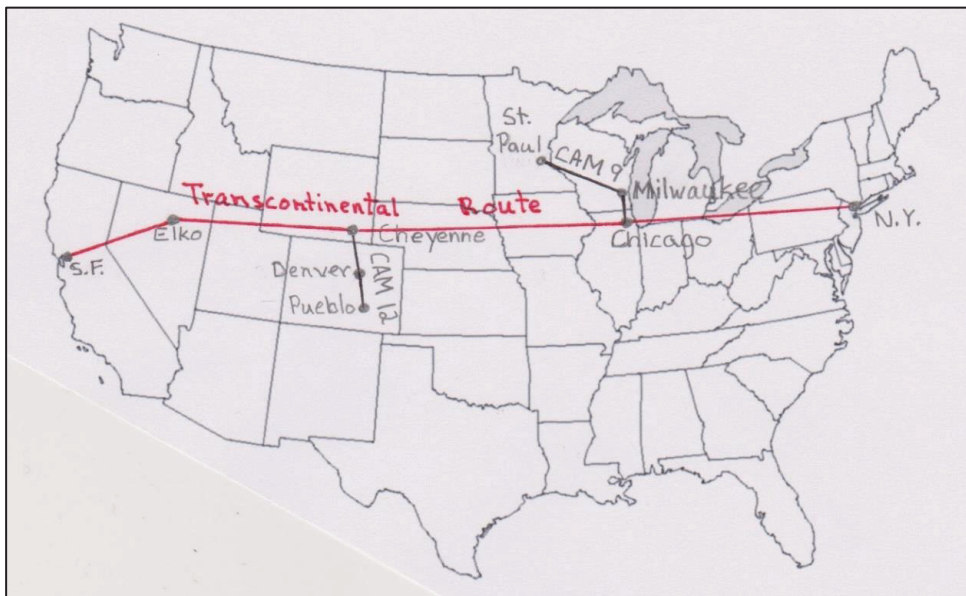


## A 1926 Contract Air Mail Cover By Patrick Crosby

Private steamships and railroads carried the U.S. mails, so why not private airlines? By mid-1924 the U.S. Government-operated transcontinental air mail route from New York to San Francisco was up and running. It was divided into three zones: New York to Chicago, Chicago to Cheyenne, WY, and Cheyenne to San Francisco. The next step was to add feeder lines from different parts of the country, and this was accomplished in 1926 employing private contractors. The U.S. Post Office Department (USPOD) granted contracts to private companies for transporting mail via airplane through a bidding process. Various companies received a contract for a Contract Air Mail route (CAM, "route" is understood), the first being flown Feb 15, 1926.



Cancels on reverse

The featured cover from Oct 10, 1926, falls right into a short time period of confusion with the air mail rates and growth pains for the fledgling commercial airline industry. This cover, which also received Special Delivery service, looks contrived with its 2¢ stamps around the perimeter, but this isn't the case. Regular issue postage stamps were always permitted for air mail and special delivery use and someone had a lot of 2¢ stamps. The postal clerk was careful to keep the postmarks out of the address area. The twelve 2¢ (Scott 583) on the current 2¢ postal stationery envelope (Sc. U522) add up to 26¢ postage.

Special Delivery was 10¢ and paid for an expedited delivery to the addressee (one try) from the Milwaukee post office. Air mail rates were a source of frustration for postal customers and employees. Hard to tally fees (needed to determine the airline contractors' compensation) and P.O. forms reluctantly and incorrectly filled out gave the USPOD accountants headaches.

I mentioned three zones of the Government's U.S. Postal Trans-continental Route, and for letters each zone or part of a zone required 8¢ postage per 1 oz. In 1923 8¢, 16¢, and 24¢ stamps were issued to meet these zone rates. Any necessary ground transportation for mail to get to or from a transcontinental



Scott C4, C5, C6.

air mail route airport was included. However, beginning in 1926 if any part of a CAM flight (or two) was also used, then 5¢ was added for each CAM flight. Each early CAM was given a number representing when the contract with the USPOD was signed, not the order of first flights. The featured cover required one transcontinental route zone and two CAM flights. With Special Delivery, the postage should be 28¢ [8 + (2 x 5) + 10 = 28]. I think the cover with 26¢ postage was underpaid by 2¢ and I don't notice where a 2¢ stamp may have come off.

Using the cover's marking and information from U.S. Postal Bulletins on Contract Air Mail, here is its timeline:

- Oct 10, 1926 (Sunday), 3:00 p.m. Denver north to Cheyenne, 100 miles, air mail on CAM 12 (Cheyenne, WY via Denver and Colorado Springs to Pueblo, CO, established May 31, 1926, daily) 5¢ postage.
- Oct 11, 1926, 5:30 am leaves Cheyenne east to Chicago, IL on transcontinental air mail route. This is one entire zone only, so 8¢ postage.
- Oct 11, 1926, 7:00 p m arrives in Chicago.
- Oct 12, 1926, 5:45 a m leaves Chicago north to Milwaukee, WI, 90 miles, air mail on CAM 9 (Chicago to Milwaukee and La Crosse, WI and St. Paul, MN, established Jun 7, 1926, 5 times weekly) 5¢ postage.
- Oct 12, 1926 (Tuesday), 6:50 a m arrives in Milwaukee. Private circular date/time stamp indicates the cover arrived at the addressed publishing company (via Special Deliver) at 7:45 a.m.

During this confusing period another source of irritation was the "Via Air Mail" handstamp as seen on the cover. By itself, without being qualified, this meant that the sender wants and should have paid for all useful air mail routes available, in this case two CAM's and one transcontinental zone. If for example the sender didn't want to pay 5¢ for air mail for the first leg of the journey from Denver to Cheyenne, he would write "Via Air Mail Cheyenne to Milwaukee".

The CAM 9, which included from Chicago to Milwaukee for the featured cover, began service in a period of severe dust storms (first flight Jun 7, 1926), with only two of the contract company's six flights arriving at the destination and the death of a pilot. The company was relieved of its CAM contract, which was eventually awarded to Northwest Airways, effective Oct 1, 1926, on that day one of their planes crashed. Northwest Airways (soon renamed Northwest Airlines) had been in operation for one month and wanted a part of the lucrative post office CAM business.

Life for many became a lot easier on Feb 1, 1927, when the U.S. continental air mail rate became 10¢ no matter how far or how many air mail routes were employed. However, this was for ½ oz., not the previous 1 oz. The 10¢ map air mail stamp (Sc. C7) was already available.

Charles “Slim” Lindbergh became the chief pilot for the Robertson Aircraft Co. and flew the first mail route between St. Louis and Chicago, CAM 2, on Apr 15, 1926. “Slim” was happy to have regular, good-paying employment. On Nov 3, 1926, Lindbergh lost a plane, the second in two weeks. Things did not look good for him, but he was not grounded. Charles Lindbergh loved flying challenges and disliked flying in calm weather.



Scott C10, Spirit of St. Louis.

While a CAM pilot he dreamed up a transatlantic flight to Paris, non-stop and solo, and then flew it on May 20-21, 1927. On his return he inscribed one photograph, “I am proud to have done it for America. My reward will be your continued use of ‘air mail’.” Of course, this also meant a lot to the confidence and success of the fledging commercial airline industry as the use of air mail soared. He became an instant celebrity and then, in a tribute to Lindbergh, his plane, the “Spirit of St. Louis” and his transatlantic route were soon shown on a 10¢ air mail postal issue (Sc. C10, issued Jun 18, 1927). It is said Charles Lindbergh did more for the promotion and success of early U.S. air mail than any other individual.



Scott 1684

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*Patrick Crosby is a member of the Nevada Stamp Study Society and collects U.S. postal stationery, stamps and postcards with an emphasis on postal history.*