

Where's Wiley's wily friend when we really, really need him???

... an Expression of Post-*Departum* Depression

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Wiley Hardeman Post (1898-1935) is one of those wonderful pieces of 20th Century Americana that seem to undeservedly fade from the national memory. He was a solid citizen, an intrepid pilot, a man of science and one of only seven civilians commonly known to have been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross by act of Congress. He died while flying in the company of a close friend and fellow American icon, a man whose humor and insight the nation badly needs today.

Wiley Post was born a Texan but became an Oklahoman by age 11. His youth included a short jail term for purloining an automobile, working as an oil field roughneck and becoming a parachutist with *Burrell Tibbs and His Texas Topnotch Fliers* on the barnstorming circuit. Around 1925 to 1927, four events occurred that profoundly changed his life – he lost his left eye in an oil field accident; he purchased his first airplane, a Curtiss Canuck (Canadian Jenny) with the compensation he received from the accident; he met fellow Oklahoman, **Will Rogers** (1897-1935), who became a lifelong friend; and he married Miss Mae Laine of Sweetwater, TX.

In 1928, Post became the personal pilot of the wealthy Oklahoma oilman, F. C. Hall. Hall purchased a Lockheed Vega, a 'hot' single-engine, high-wing, 8-place aircraft of the period. He christened the plane *Winnie Mae* after his daughter (not after Wiley's wife) and used it for personal transport. He also allowed Wiley to campaign the airplane in various aeronautical competitions. Post began collecting trophies, starting with the 1930 Los Angeles-to-Chicago *National Air Race*. In 1930, Hall traded the airplane for a more advanced Vega 5-C; the new craft was also named the *Winnie Mae*, and Wiley used it to set his most famous records.

On June 23, 1931, the *Winnie Mae* lifted off from Roosevelt Field on Long Island, NY, and headed East. She landed on the same field 8 days, 15 hours and 51 minutes later after circumnavigating the earth, a first for a fixed-wing aircraft. Wiley Post and his navigator, Australian Naval Cadet **Harold Gatty** (1903-1957) had beaten the 21-day record set by Hugo Eckener in the *Graff Zeppelin* in 1929. The lighter-than-air vessel would never again hold a duration airspeed record.

Post beat his own record in 1933, and he did it *alone*. He and the *Winnie Mae* departed from Brooklyn, New York's Floyd Bennett Field on July 15, 1933. They returned there in just 7 days and 19 hours, handily beating the time he and Gatty had set. Instead of the Tasmanian-born Gatty, Post relied upon two new instruments,



Will Rogers (1879-1935), part Cherokee Indian, Oklahoma cowboy, movie star, all-American humorist, writer and revered political philosopher.

a *radio compass* and an *autopilot*, both developed by Sperry Gyroscope Company and the United States Army.

Following his triumphant solo circumnavigation, he turned his attention to high-altitude flight. Since the Vega's fuselage could not be practically pressurized, he focussed upon developing a 'rubber' flight-suit to pressurize his body. In concert with the very capable Russell Colley of the B. F. Goodrich Company, he developed a three-layer "spaceman suit" using liquid oxygen to both pressurize the suit and provide a breathing atmosphere. He demonstrated this predecessor of a modern astronaut's space suit by flying to 40,000 feet above Chicago on September 5, 1934. A later flight probably broke 50,000 feet, but failure of the recording instrumentation deprived him of an official record.

While Wiley Post was setting records for altitude, distance and speed, his good friend was becoming America's most popular entertainer. Will Rogers was a film star (51 silent movies and 20 'talkies'), an author (six books and more than 4,000 newspaper columns), a syndicated radio personality and the friend of kings and presidents. Through it all, he remained true to his roots; he was always a down-to-earth Oklahoma cowboy. Through it all, Will and Wiley remained close friends though fame wrapped around both of them. They traveled a lot together, frequently in a plane piloted by Wiley.

So it was that the two friends met death together near Point Barrow, Alaska. They were vacationing in an exciting way, flying through the wild Alaska territory in an experimental amphibious aircraft Post had



Wiley Post, President Herbert Hoover and Harold Gatty on August 18, 1932 (DFC Presentation).



Wiley Post testing his high-altitude flight suit with B. F. Goodrich engineer, Russell S. Colley in 1934.



Will Rogers and Wiley Post departing Point Barrow, Alaska (2004 painting by Mike Wimmer).

assembled, not the record-breaking *Winnie Mae*. Their low-wing, float-equipped aircraft consisted of a Lockheed Orion fuselage fitted with Lockheed Explorer wings, a 550 HP Wasp engine, an oversized fuel tank and pontoon floats designed for a much larger aircraft. Around Burbank airport, where it was built, the aircraft was called "Wiley's Bastard" and "Wiley's Orphan." Will Rogers called it *Aurora Borealis* and trusted it and his friend to bring them back home safely. That didn't happen; they crashed fatally after an engine failure into cold shallow waters on the morning of August 15, 1935.

Here, in September of 2008, a very different type of crash has momentarily snatched America's attention away from our expensive march towards a national election. With both national political conventions

astern, rural Alaska is again drawn into every mind's eye. I wonder what Will Rogers might have had to say about our modern events? Regarding politics, I don't need to wonder – quotes from that brilliant fellow who died 73 years ago still ring resonantly today. Consider, for example:

"I don't make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts."

"Liberty doesn't work as well in practice as it does in speeches."

"Politics has become so expensive that it takes a lot of money even to be defeated."

"If we didn't have two parties in this country, we'd elect the best man and things would run just fine. But as it is, we nominate the worst ones and then fight over them."

Regardless of your left or right political stance, you have to love his comments. Who says we have to love a party?

"I am not a member of any organized political party. I am a democrat."

"Democrats never agree on anything, that's why they're Democrats. If they agreed with each other, they would be Republicans."

"The difference between a Republican and a Democrat is the Democrat is a cannibal they have to live off each other, while the Republicans, why,

they live off the Democrats."

Whether you are a staunch Republican or a rabid Democrat (please feel free to reverse the adjectives), no one sees human benefit in war. Neither did Will Rogers. Some of his best observations on this topic include:

"I have a scheme for stopping war. It's this – no nation is allowed to enter a war till they have paid for the last one."

"I don't care how little your country is, you got a right to run it like you want to. When the big nations quit meddling then the world will have peace."

"Now if there is one thing that we do worse than any other nation, it is try and manage somebody else's affairs."

"If we ever pass out as a great nation we ought to put on our tombstone, America died from a delusion that she has moral leadership."

While Mr. Rogers "never met a man I didn't like," he certainly knew his neighborhood was populated by folks of varying persuasions. I like his outlook on this matter:

"Everybody is ignorant, only on different subjects."

"All I know is just what I read in the papers, and that's an alibi for my ignorance."

"People are getting smarter nowadays; they are letting lawyers, instead of their conscience, be their guide."

Without question, I agree with the following! History must, indeed, repeat itself.

"A fool and his money are soon elected."

"Our constitution protects aliens, drunks and U.S. senators."

"There ought to be one day, just one, when there is open season on senators."

"About all I can say for the United States Senate is that it opens with a prayer and closes with an investigation."

"Ancient Rome declined because it had a Senate, now what's going to happen to us with both a House and a Senate?"

So, there we have it – sufficient reason to "vote early and often" as two Chicago mayors and a famous Chicago gangster were fond of advising. All three were notorious for their corruption and manipulation of the democratic process. Given all of the above, I feel Will hit the nail on the head with our closing line:

"Be thankful we're not getting all the government we're paying for."

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