

Rock Hill's earliest flights were civic extravaganzas

Rock Hill's first airport was built by John Roddey on the Rock Hill-Chester Highway in 1930. It was designed to serve specifically as a commercial operation.

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NEARBY HISTORY

The concept was visionary; it was also remarkable because Roddey had never seen another airport, nor had he ever flown in an airplane.

Roddey, businessman, farmer, civic leader and former mayor of Rock Hill, gave up 230 acres of his farmland for the airport. The mile-long, 20-foot-wide landing strips were arranged like spokes around a central, cleared circle. Today the design would not be acceptable, but the reason given then was that the pilot would have the choice of taking off under the best wind conditions.

Always a promoter of Rock Hill, Roddey devised a plan with the Chamber of Commerce to publicize the town by initiating an airmail route out of Rock Hill. (Chester County's first airport wasn't built until near the end of World War II, when the Army Air Corps built a field to train pilots, but the war was ending and the airport was not used.) The specific plans for Rock Hill's airport unveiling were made by Rock Hill's city manager, W.P. Goodman.

The target date was April 1, 1930. All during March, the plans were publicized. Some pushed the idea of using Rock Hill's local pilots and planes. It was decided that the airplane would carry 100 airmail letters from the mayor of Rock Hill to 100 mayors of large American cities. The public, including Winthrop College students, was invited to send airmail letters, as well. Every letter and postal card would be stamped with "All the Way from Rock Hill, the Good Town, by Air." ("Rock Hill, the Good Town" was a

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phrase widely used to advertise Rock Hill.) At the time, about a dozen airmail letters were leaving Rock Hill daily.

April 1 was too early. The planners were not ready. It was April 9 at 4 p.m. when the plane, piloted by J.L. "Sonny" Phillips Jr. of Rock Hill took off for Charlotte with the airmail pouches. Phillips was sent off by an applauding, enthusiastic crowd along with city officials who had arrived at the airport in automobiles draped in bunting. Two other planes, a cabin Curtiss-Robin and one flown by a Chester man named Betts, followed Phillips' plane.

No sooner than Phillips took off, the cars, carrying Mayor J.B. Johnson, Roddey, W.P. Goodman, J.T. Givens, W.G. Stevens, W.B. Byers, T.W. Huey and W.B. McFadden, headed for the Charlotte airport. A Chevrolet truck from McFadden-Huey Chevrolet Co. went along to carry the mail pouches, containing hundreds of letters, from the airport to the Charlotte post office for cancellation.

The Curtiss-Robin cabin cruiser was permanently stationed at Roddey Field by the Curtiss-Wright Flying Service of Raleigh.

The flying service held a federal license and had two functions: It carried special cargo under contract and taught pilots to fly "without using railroads as markers."

E.C. Sutton and a corps of fliers came from Raleigh as guests of Roddey. Roddey hoped to set up a large commercial operation with hangars, a waiting room, express depot, garage, restaurants and an office at Roddey Field.

It was quite a vision on the part of Roddey, and it was not all fulfilled, but it was typical of the man who owned Rock Hill's first

automobile.

Roddey liked to tell how, when he bought his first car at the turn of the century, his father, Capt. W.L. Roddey, had protested "such a fool contraption."

Captain Roddey told his son that he would be "running into stores and houses, scaring horses and mules, making enemies with every horse owner and eventually killing himself in a thing that would travel at such a terrific speed as 30 miles an hour." John T., who was also locally famed as a baseball player, later noted that since that time he had owned at least a dozen automobiles and was still alive.

Pilots "Sonny" Phillips and Hicklin Roddey told the newspapers that, by 1940, the airplane would be as safe as an automobile - and much faster.

The first airplane to come to Rock Hill was brought in by the promoters of the 1913 York County Fair. A pilot named Terrell flew a Curtiss-Wright biplane constructed of bamboo and steel and landed it on the north side of the Winthrop College campus at the spot now occupied by Joynes Hall.

The pilot thrilled the crowd by performing daring stunts in the sky. Terrell flew twice each day of the fair. Every time he started his motor for takeoff, three men had to hold the plane in place while he revved it up.

Once aloft, he performed a number of intricate maneuvers. The crowd's favorite was the dropping of miniature bombs - a fireworks show that originated in the sky.

Terrell had a contract with the provision that if the weather was bad or if, in the aviator's judgment, conditions were dangerous, the flights would be postponed or the money returned.

Roddey advised everybody to save those airmail letters dated April 9, 1930, and stamped with "All the Way from Rock Hill, the Good Town, by Air." He said they would be valuable some day.

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