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— a transition article —

THE WAYNOKA CONNECTION

— Phil Ewing Gafford



ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE AIKEN

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Waynoka rates only an asterisk on Oklahoma's Great Plains Package. But this Woods County Community deserves higher acclaim. It was the hub of a stranger-than-fiction connection that marked a revolutionary transition in transportation history.

Waynoka was the mid-point of the 1929 honeymoon of two unusual partners in marriage, a tin goose and an iron horse. The union gave birth to a transcontinental travel dream, New York to Los Angeles in 48 hours.

Passengers flew by day in an all-metal Ford Tri-motor, the historic "Tin Goose," and rode by night in a Pullman behind a coal-burning locomotive, the legendary "Iron Horse." The Waynoka connection was half way in the coast-to-coast route, home of an evening plane-to-train transfer for westbound passengers and a morning train-to-plane transfer eastbound.

Born in July, 1929, the baby lived only 15 months. Waynoka's vision of becoming the world's transportation center died with it. History, however is likely to look kindly on this little town. It was part of the leading edge of an unprecedented avalanche of aeronautical development that exploded in a short seven-year span, 1929 to 1936.

Will Rogers and Charles Lindbergh played prominent parts in the imaginative plane-train venture.

Rogers made at least one test flight on the transcon route as well as frequent other trips. Although never employed by Transcontinental Air Transport airline or Santa Fe railroad, Rogers was an active "ambassador" in support of the service.

Lindbergh was employed as chairman of TAT's technical committee by the line's founder, Clement M. Keys, financier and former editor of *The Wall Street Journal*. Keys sought to capitalize on the aviation boom that followed Lindy's 1927 trans-Atlantic flight.

Lindbergh directed selection of routes, equipment and pilot personnel. He specifically chose Waynoka as the central office for the bold experiment, supervising investment of almost \$1,000,000 in TAT's base five miles northeast of town. TAT was dubbed the "Lindbergh Line," and his picture was included in advertisements.

"Colonel Charles Lindbergh and wife visited the Waynoka airport last Friday and inspected the field while his plane was being refueled (sic) and made ready for their further flight westward, bound on an inspection tour of the T.A.T. - Maddux air route," reported the Woods County Enterprise issue of January 10, 1930.

While the Waynoka paper occasionally noted Lindbergh items, his visits became too frequent to make news.

"I saw Will Rogers and Charles Lindbergh often on the streets of Waynoka," recalled area native Garold Whitlaw, now a prominent Oklahoma executive.

"Just out of Waynoka high school, I was part of the town's boom. I remember the crowds at the Fred Harvey house. My senior class had its prom there. It was a place for the 'elite 400' with more silverware and big heavy napkins and table cloths than I've ever seen anywhere."

Whitlaw remains very much part of the Waynoka connection, spending most weekends at his plush home on one of two large Whitlaw-owned ranches.

First trip of the Tin Goose-Iron Horse marriage began at 6:05 P.M., Saturday, July 7, 1929. Passengers departed New York on a Pennsylvania train, leaving it the next morning after breakfast at Columbus, Ohio. They crossed the tracks, climbed into a Ford Trimotor and took off for the Waynoka connection with intermediate stops at Indianapolis, St. Louis, Kansas City and Wichita.

Arriving Waynoka 12 minutes ahead of the 6:24 p.m. schedule Sunday, July 8, the passengers were transported by bus to the Fred Harvey Home restaurant at the Santa Fe depot. Following dinner, they boarded a Pullman attached to the railroad's "Missionary" special to Clovis.

Clovis arrival time was 7:20 the next morning. Passengers breakfasted at the Harvey House there before being driven six miles to Santa Fe's Gallaher station, now site of Cannon Air Force base, for an 8:10 a.m. departure to Los Angeles. The day's flight included stops at Albuquerque, Winslow and Kingman before its scheduled arrival in Los Angeles at 5:52 p.m.

The eastbound trip was by air from Los Angeles to Clovis, Pullman from Clovis to Waynoka, air to Columbus and Pullman to New York.

P. Hicks Daniel, Santa Fe retiree who in 1912 was the railroad's first agent at Heman six miles southwest of Waynoka, remembered his later work as traveling agent out of the Amarillo general offices.

"I went monthly from Amarillo to St. Louis and back in the '29 - '30 period. My return was on the Missionary, meeting the air-train-air passengers in the evening at Waynoka. The train conductor or brakeman inquired in advance how many passengers wanted meals at the Harvey House, and that information was 'wired' ahead so the meals could be ready when the train arrived.

"Supper at the Harvey House was real good. I think it cost \$1.25. With stops at all stations for mail, Wells-Fargo express, baggage and passengers, plus 'flagstops' at 'blind sidings,' the 310-mile run from Waynoka to Clovis was an overnight schedule. Pullman fare was \$2.00."

Total cost of the transcon journey in 1929 was \$351.94, about twice the price of luxury train all the way. A headline in the January 17, 1930 issue of the Enterprise reported, "AIR TRAVEL RATES GREATLY REDUCED." The article listed new fares, including rail ticket and lower berth to Clovis and air beyond, from Waynoka to Albuquerque, \$26; Winslow, \$38; Kingman, \$49; and Los Angeles, \$63.

A week later, the Waynoka newspaper told of a TAT Trimotor crash in California, noting it "marked the greatest disaster in American Commercial air transportation." The accident claimed 16 lives, including 2 pilots, six other men and eight women.

Despite the tragedy, the air-train combination carried capacity loads in early 1930. On Sunday, January 27, TAT planes counted 79 passengers between Columbus and Waynoka, posting a record 75,075 passenger miles in one day.

Most issues of the Enterprise included stories of famous people making part or all of the coast-to-coast trip. Amelia Earhart was on the inaugural trip. Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the "Czar" of baseball, was on one flight into Waynoka. Chick Bale, nationally-known comedian and author spent a night in Waynoka enroute by TAT-train from St. Louis to Los Angeles. Anne Morrow Lindbergh made many trips, the paper of January 3, 1930, noting that "he (Lindbergh) usually was accompanied on his flights by his bride."

Helen Chapman is another native Waynokan with vivid memories of the great experiment. "I remember Colonel Lindbergh and Will Rogers coming in often. The crews stayed at the big, new Eastman Hotel. Being just a year out of high school, I thrilled every time I saw the pilots. Maybe it was their uniforms. They wore dark suits with white shirts and dark ties. Their caps were something like train conductors: but more flashy, cocky, jaunty.

"There was no security," continued Mrs. Chapman. "Crowds walked right up to the planes. Lindbergh sometimes sat on a bench near the plane, casually visiting with the public."

Wayne Carson, treasurer and past president of the Waynoka Chamber of Commerce, was born north of town in the year of TAT's glory. Recently he stood across the tracks, looking at the imposing Fred Harvey House building.

"There's a historical monument," he said. "I think there should be much more of this important history preserved for future generations. I'm dedicated to seeing that it is."

Well it should be.

Waynoka's dream ended in October, 1930. On October 17, 1930, just 12 days before the first anniversary of the stock market crash, the Woods County Enterprise carried a story of the last TAT plane to arrive on a regular run. It was empty. Passengers had chosen the new all-air route with Tulsa and Oklahoma City stops between St. Louis and Amarillo. Transcontinental Air Transport soon would become Trans World Airlines (TWA).

But a collapsed economy and massive \$3,000,000 deficit didn't kill this baby born of an experimental marriage; rather, it succumbed to progress, fading into history as an indelible chapter in the story of technological advance.

In less than six more years, aerodynamics and cooperating sciences counted invention unrivaled in any other similar short span of time. Advanced wing and body design, drag reduction, "skins" smoothed with flush rivets, retractable landing gear, increased engine efficiency, 100 octane gasoline, radio guidance, automatic pilot and other instruments were among the innovations.

The Douglas DC-3 emerged as a product of this super-creative period. Following its first flight in July, 1936, exactly seven years after the TAT-train honeymoon, the DC-3 established unmatched records for dependability and service.

Commercial aviation came of age in that dust-bowl year, 1936. The baby born of the mating of the Tin Goose and Iron-Horse played a brief but important part in making it possible. It all came together at the Waynoka connection.

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