


LEARNING FROM HISTORY

ALPA and the Case of The Three Signatures

 Historical research usually is a dry-as-dust endeavor, consisting mostly of delving into dusty archives with only a pot of coffee and a pressing deadline to keep the researcher motivated.

Sometimes, though, the researcher is startled to hear the *ta-ra, ta-ra!* of the hunter's horn as an unexpected object of prey darts across his path. Then it's "Talley-ho!" and the chase is on. If the researcher is especially lucky, the chase also takes on the elements of a mystery story.

This is precisely what happened to me in October 2005. The timing was perfect. ALPA staff had just gotten off the ground with planning for the Association's 75th anniversary, which will be celebrated with events throughout 2006. One of our tasks was locating items of historical interest to display at events.

On one otherwise uneventful workday, as I was sorting through the usual assortment of incoming e-mail to ALPA's Communications Department, one missive jumped out at me from the daily parade of requests, complaints, and spam. It was from a Lowell Joerg of Tucson, Ariz., and began as follows: "Years ago, I came into possession of an envelope commemorating the First Flight of night airmail service between St. Paul and Chicago. It's dated Aug. 1, 1929. The piece is autographed by the three pilots, M.B. Freeburg, L.S. Dehoney(?), and R.L. Smith.... It is quite attractive and I doubt many, if any, others still exist.... My wife says if I hear from you, I will have to take her to lunch."

The writer suggested that he might be willing to sell it. Although I've collected coins since childhood, I knew virtually nothing about stamps. Nevertheless, it sounded interesting enough for me to enquire further. After offering my condolences because

he now owed his spouse a lunch, I asked for more details.

The additional information he supplied made it even more intriguing. Although it was not a first-day issue, he did have a special cover commemorating the first night airmail flight.

That, in itself, made it only a collectable philatelic item. I was far more interested in the three pilots who had signed the envelope, so I immediately started checking their names against the list of ALPA's founding members.

Bingo! Our paper printout of the Founding Fathers included one R.L. Smith, and an M.B. Freeburg! Both turned up in the ALPA membership database. Both were Northwest pilots. By that time, I had been advising my manager on this development, and he immediately spotted both names on the large bronze plaque that hangs near the entrance to the ALPA building in Herndon, Va. We were now certain that this was the real deal, a genuine ALPA relic.

I wasted no time firing off an e-mail to the seller. "We'll take it." He assured us that it would go out with the next mail.

With the prospective article of ALPA history now winging its way to our hands, we still were left with the mystery of the third signature. The seller had struggled with deciphering the name as "Dehoney." He also had told me that at about the same time the cover had been issued, he had gotten his first airplane ride from a barnstorming biplane pilot while sitting in his father's lap. He had to be fairly well along in years, so I figured that a closer look might reveal something different than what his aging eyesight could make out.

It turns out that I was right, but it took my manager's eagle eyes, honed by a stint in Army intelligence, to

come up with the answer. "Delong!" he exclaimed after gazing at the envelope for a few minutes. "Looks like 'Delong' to me."

Neither the Founding Fathers list nor the member database had anyone who answered to the name Delong, so I turned to the modern researcher's standard reference guide: google.com. Zillions of unrelated hits scrolled out of various combinations of search words, until one combination floated a promising URL to the top of the pile. Clicking on it, my request zoomed away through who knows how many thousands of miles of Internet connections until it deposited me at [ta-da!] an *Air Line Pilot* article, "Capt. Joe Kimm, Quiet Birdman," which ran in May/June 2002 and was now residing on an ALPA network server a few yards from where I sat. As with any good mystery story, an important clue had been lurking almost within touching distance, patiently waiting for the sleuth to look in its direction.

Capt. Kimm was one of ALPA's legendary founders. More to the point for me, the article had photographs and text that mentioned both Smith and Freeburg, and—yes!—a photograph with one of the pilots identified as "Deke Delong." So all three were contemporaries at Northwest at the time. Another google search using that name brought even more references. (The search was complicated by the fact that while every reference I found spelled it "Delong," I couldn't find him in the member database until I tried spelling it "De Long." A closer look at the signature suggests that this was his preferred spelling. Although not one of the "Founding 500," he clearly had become an ALPA member at some point.)

Any lingering doubts were thoroughly dispelled when I took a closer look at the original. In addition to the



stamp and signatures, the envelope bore what's called a "cachet," a graphic and text device tied to the occasion of the issuance. At the bottom of it were the words "Cachet by Northwest Airways, Inc." Northwest had flown the first night airmail drop, from St. Paul to Chicago. All three

same light-blue color but then darkens almost to black. Not even a Sherlock Holmes would be able to unravel this part of the mystery.

In technical terms, the stamp is a 5-cent airmail, catalogued as C11, Beacon on Rocky Mountains. The Northwest cachet suggests that the cover

ally need to know about this amazing artifact. It commemorates one of the early milestones of commercial aviation. It bears the signatures of three pilots who were venturesome pioneers in this budding industry. Later on, they would be instrumental in founding the union that has rep-



pilots were from Northwest and were in the ALPA database. We now had a positive make on all three signers and the airline.

The only remaining question was when and where the envelope had been autographed by these three hardy aviators. Were they all three clustered around the terminal when the inaugural flight took off or landed? Did someone, perhaps a Northwest employee who collected stamps, track them down one by one and ask them to sign his trophy item? The first and third signatures, by Freeburg and Smith, appear to be made using the same pen. The ink in the De Long signature starts out the

may have been a company promotion. More mousing on google showed that Harry Citret, the addressee in New Jersey, was in the stamp business and routinely ordered first-day covers. This last finding further complicates the provenance of our item and perhaps eliminates the more romantic scenarios of how the signatures came to be affixed. Perhaps we'll never know.

Oh, well. Perhaps it is best to have a small dollop of mystery still surrounding this artifact, to add to its "cachet" (so to speak). Everyone and every thing of a certain age should have at least one secret to keep.

No matter. We know what we re-

resented them and thousands of their successors in the intervening 75 years.

For more than 75 years, the envelope had languished in the hands of a few collectors who prized it for its modest philatelic value. They had no idea of its significance to the Association that would later be born from the near-heroic flying of these and other pilots of that era. And now, thanks to a chance encounter via an electronic medium that threatens to make stamps and envelopes obsolete, it has flown home to its rightful resting place via the same airmail service that it had once commemorated. Case closed.—*John Mazor, Senior Communications Specialist*