

Virginia Aviation History Project



American Airways Ford Trimotor Transports FDR to Chicago Democratic Convention

by Baird Wonsey and Marguerite Wonsey

On July 2, 1932, an American Airways Ford Trimotor carrying the just-nominated Democratic candidate for president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt flew from Albany NY to Chicago IL to deliver his acceptance speech to convention delegates. It was the best publicity any airline had received to date.

(Eagle, The Story of American Airlines, Robert J. Serling © 1985)

Roosevelt made the flight in a Ford Trimotor flown by Capt. Ray D. Wonsey of American Airways and co-pilot Fred Clark Smith. No other presidential candidate had flown to such an event or immediately addressed convention delegates. Max J. Pollet, who served as American's first Steward on the flight, was District Sales Manager for American's Colonial division in Albany, NY. As it was Pollet's job to promote air travel, he was key to the operation and coordinated much of airline's effort.

Passenger traffic was gradually increasing on the network of local air carriers that had become American Airways in January 1930. The northeastern division was operating Stinson trimotors and newer single engine, nine-passenger Pilgrims. Max Pollet's Colonial Division was flying trimotored Stinson SM-6000 "airliners" which the company had taken over from Century Air in April 1932. Carrying up to eleven passengers, these tube-and-fabric airplanes were routed from New York to Montreal and Cleveland, refueling at Albany's airport, a grass and gravel field, which was grandly touted as "the aerial crossroads of the Great Northeast".

photo courtesy Marguerite & Baird Wonsey



The crew of the Colonial Airways Trimotors pose with their aircraft. These aircraft did the Boston to New York route; the picture was taken at the Boston Airport.

The Democratic National Convention was to be held in Chicago in late June, and canny politicians were hard at work, pushing convention delegates from all over the nation to back Roosevelt, who at that time was serving his second 2-year term as Governor of NY.

Roosevelt's lower body paralysis was not generally known to the Nation, and though he had worked hard to improve his physical condition and wore leg braces, he could hardly stand erect without the additional support of canes, a podium or a friendly arm. His NY press relations were excellent and he would joke with Albany newsmen, saying "No pictures getting out of the car, boys" and they would comply. Even unfriendly newspapers and newsreel cameramen practiced respectful restraint.

All parties reasoned the dramatic act of flying to Chicago would promote FDR as a daring and forceful leader. Pollet contacted the Governor's Secretary, Guernsey Cross, and under a veil of secrecy, they began arrangements, finally agreeing to a charter flight in the larger all-metal Ford trimotor. Basing the fare on a party of 6, they settled on a total of \$300.00 for the 1-way trip. Pollet arranged for the Ford Trimotor monoplane from American Airways' Southern Division. Pulled off the Dallas-Los Angeles run, the 15-passenger ship was flown up from Texas. Arriving in Albany after dark, it was quickly locked into the American Airways hangar. The next 36 hours were spent polishing the corrugated metal exterior and making sure the three Pratt & Whitney Wasp engines were running smoothly. Chief mechanic Gerald Kelly fashioned a special ramp, a wooden gangplank by which FDR might have ready access to the plane's elliptical cabin door. Inside, Kelly and his men took out the #3 seat for more legroom and fashioned a writing desk for the governor at seat #5 by the door. An improvised typing table was also provided. Pollet checked the ramp and wired American's Terminal managers in Cleveland and Chicago to ready the same at both locations. Special arrangements continued for security, food and keeping the flight in touch via radio.

Ray D. Wonsey, Chief Pilot of American's Colonial Division was the logical choice to fly Governor Roosevelt



photo courtesy Marguerite & Baird Wonsey

Ray Wonsey in his Air Mail Colonial uniform

to Chicago. The 35-year old had logged 4,000 hours since his WWI training in 1918 and had flown cargo, mail and passengers for Ford, Colonial and American. Based in Newark, NJ, he traveled by train and taxi to the Albany Airport to meet Max Pollet. American's choice for co-pilot was another veteran with 3,000 hours, Fred Clark Smith. He'd flown trimotor Stinsons from Newark to Cleveland and was familiar with Fords. The pilots looked over their gleaming airliner and went on standby, awaiting announcement of the Governor's presidential nomination.

Despite all preparations and assurances, the Democrats did not immediately nominate FDR. Sitting up most of the night, the weary delegates began taking roll calls. After the third ballot, the convention adjourned at 9:15 a.m. and the Governor was still 100 votes short of the necessary two-thirds majority.

For the Roosevelt family in Albany's executive mansion, July 1st was a day of anxious waiting. At the airport, Wonsey, Pollet and Smith circled the Ford trimotor and kicked the tires. By 10:30 p.m., Roosevelt's bags were being



Ray Wonsey (right) with his partner Lockwood (left) and their \$500 Jenny

packed when he heard confirmation of his nomination on the radio. By midnight, Pollet dropped the veil of secrecy he'd struggled to maintain. The seven reporters who had been poking around were no longer issued denials and Pollet started his calls to newspapers, radio stations and newsreel personnel.

If Max Pollet was disconcerted when the size of the governor's party was confirmed, he did not let on. Instead of six, there would be ten: FDR and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, their sons Elliott and John, Secretary Cross and two private secretaries, speech writer Samuel Rosenman and 2 bodyguards.

By Saturday morning, July 2, seventy members of the news media gathered at

the Albany Airport, tripping over microphone wires in the crush to use only two available phones by which their stories would be relayed. Shiny NC415H rolled out of the American hanger and was positioned for photographers beside the Administration Building. Pilots Wonsey and Smith stayed in the cockpit, checking and re-checking their handful of instruments. Running up the engines, they studied the unfavorable weather reports.

The governor's motorcade arrived shortly after 8:00 a.m. and parked under the broad wing of the monoplane. Twenty minutes were spent in talk and photography on the special wooden ramp. Roosevelt appeared tanned and fit, wearing a double-breasted light blue summer suit and Panama hat. Dangling his cane, he stood erect, carefully and unobtrusively held by his 21-year-old son, Elliott.

The clouds looked threatening and Pollet urged immediate departure. Gus Gennerick and Earl Miller, Roosevelt's trusted bodyguards emerged from the plane and helped Roosevelt aboard.

Pathe and Movietone News cameras recorded the Ford Trimotor trundling to the far end of the gravel runway at Albany Airport. Wonsey swung nearly five tons of airship and human cargo into position. The trio of Wasp engines roared, the plane began to roll, the tail came up and a short run put the ship in the air. Wheels spinning, it dipped once and then swung in a wide arc into the glowering skies to the west. Twenty minutes later the weather closed in with a downpour, sending remaining newsmen and well wishers running for their cars.

Airborne, the Roosevelt party headed up the Mohawk Valley through the overcast, flying low with a heavy storm in progress to the north. Everyone was jubilant to be off and the first half-hour of flight was spent passing around the governor's congratulatory telegrams. Vigorously chewing gum, he scanned newspaper headlines and editorials.

For the 783 mile trip, the passengers were confined to a space barely 18-feet long, 6-feet high and averaging only 4-feet 6-inches wide. Even with primitive soundproofing, the pounding roar from 27 cylinders kept

conversations at shout level. Anxious to keep his passengers happy, Pollet wormed his way up and down the narrow aisle, distributing gum in several flavors, route maps and American Airways postcards. While Mrs. Roosevelt knitted a baby sweater, the secretaries and bodyguards wrote cards or tried to nap.

Beyond Syracuse, north of the Finger Lake region, there were storms all around the low-flying Ford and wind out of the west held the ship back like an invisible restraining hand. At one point, the crew discussed the possibility of landing at Rochester and continuing by train. Aware the nation's attention was on the flight, Pollet kept the busy pilots sending out position and progress reports and short radio messages calculated to be of "human interest".

Pilots Wonsey and Smith, now both engaged in holding the massive Ford control column wheels steady in the turbulence, reached Buffalo Airport east of the City, at 11:05 a.m.. They were glad to set the plane down.

A spontaneous cheer from the waiting crowd of nearly 1500 greeted the travelers as the Ford taxied up to the American hangar. All but FDR disembarked to stretch their legs for half-an-hour. The Governor remained onboard, allowing visits with newsmen, western NY politicians and friends.

Off again at 11:44 a.m., the trimotor flew in improved weather but still had to skirt thunderstorms and buck heavy headwinds. An escort of two military aircraft and a chartered newspaper plane soon fell behind and turned back.

More headlines in newly acquired Buffalo papers claimed the attention of the Roosevelt party as Pollet prepared to serve lunch over Erie, PA. Cold chicken, peanut butter & jelly and cream cheese & olive sandwiches, fresh fruit, small containers of melting ice cream and chocolate cake. Ginger ale on ice was the only beverage and everyone, Pollet reported, "did full justice to the lunch".

Though there were at least three different versions of Roosevelt's speech and as many as five different writers were given or claimed credit for its content, much of it was edited, rephrased and perfected for delivery aboard the jouncing Ford en route to Chicago. Judge Samuel Rosenman worked with Mr. & Mrs. Roosevelt and son Elliott, passing pages around for comment while secretary Missy LeHand took shorthand. She and Grace Tully used the improvised typing table to pound out a more final version. Running late, the chartered flight reached the Cleveland airport at 1:43 p.m.. The waiting crowd numbered nearly 5000 but again, Roosevelt stayed aboard to meet the press and political supporters.

Winging on to Chicago, radio messages were broadcast and listeners from coast-to coast could hear the static-punctured answers to the questions put by Max Pollet to FDR:

Pollet: "How are you enjoying your flight?"

FDR: "My first in a big cabin ship. When I was in the Navy Department, we had only open cockpit ships."

Pollet: "Do you think aviation has a future?"

FDR: "Yes, a definite and probably rather gradual growth each year."

Mrs. Roosevelt also spoke a few words: when Pollet asked, "What do you think of American Airways service?" both the Governor and his wife responded gallantly: "Excellent and very comfortable!"

Later, Mrs. Roosevelt was asked if she thought flying "should appeal to women?" to which she diplomatically replied, "I think it should appeal to everyone" She may have had her tongue in cheek, glancing in the direction of John, her miserable younger son, who was airsick most of the trip.

Within the next half-hour, the pioneering political flight became even more uncomfortable. Fred Smith's log records that the entire trip was made in overcast at heights not exceeding 2000 feet. Ever-present head winds slowed the Ford, which at best cruising speed averaged little more than 100 mph. Cross currents buffeted the ship unmercifully so it rose and fell, yawed and wallowed. Ford Trimotors built in 1929 were only equipped with seat belts for the 2 pilots. White knuckled passengers could only cling to the upholstered arms of the aluminum chairs. In the turbulence, acceptance speech sheets slid off the desk and the typewriter came close to pitching off the table into Miss LeHand's lap.

According to a consensus of accounts descriptive of the flight, only the pilots, gum-chewing Governor Roosevelt and his son Elliott escaped airsickness. The others were ill with bouts that ranged in intensity from mild to violent, but tried to appear cheerful and hoped for abatement of the turbulence of air and stomach. Fortunately, fresh air could be admitted through vents and sliding windows.

In Chicago, the waiting Democratic Convention marked time with "favorite son" speeches and mid-afternoon, nominated John Nance Garner of Texas for vice-president. The delegates were kept informed of the imminent arrival of their standard-bearer by short radio bulletins fed through loudspeakers. FDR passed a note to Wonsey for radio transmission to Chicago's Mayor, Anton Cermak: "Sorry, strong headwind makes us a little late but it is a delightful trip and we are getting a fine view".

photo courtesy of Marguerite and Baird Wonsey



Franklin D. Roosevelt, family and friends arrive in Chicago on July 2, 1932 to accept the Democratic Presidential nomination. The American Airlines Ford Tri-Motor was piloted by Captain Ray Wonsey.

At Chicago's Municipal Airport, the Mayor and welcoming committee waited with a crowd that swelled to an estimated 25,000. At last the American Airways trimotor was spotted in the east, descending through a rainsquall and billowing clouds. Much later than expected Wonsey and Smith touched the Ford safely down at 4:30pm, seven hours and forty minutes out of Albany (2:00pm was the scheduled arrival time).

As the crowd waited, the Ford's passengers came down the bunting-hung ramp, glad to have both feet on terra firma. Last to emerge from the Ford was FDR. His elder son Elliot and Gus Gennerich somehow maneuvered him skillfully through the cabin door and he stood erect, making in his son's words, "a conqueror's appearance".

The cheering crowd broke through the flimsy police barricade and for a moment threatened to engulf the party. FDR's hat fell off and his glasses were dislodged, but he managed to shout something encouraging before his words were lost in the tumult. The Roosevelt entourage joined a motorcade of sixty automobiles that wound through packed streets en route to an even noisier, rising acclaim at the Democratic Convention in Chicago's Stadium.

Ray Wonsey, Fred Clark Smith and Max Pollet of American Airways, their historic journey over, found a hotel, ate dinner and went to bed.

Downtown, Roosevelt delivered the speech he had perfected in the bouncing Ford trimotor. In its final paragraph were the two words by which his Presidency would be known: “I pledge you, I pledge myself to a **new deal** for the American people...”

And Will Rogers had the last word: “Roosevelt gave a good speech yesterday. And he gave aviation the biggest boost it ever had...”

The charter to Chicago had truly give Franklin Delano Roosevelt a flying start toward the White House.

ABOUT THE PILOT

In July 1932, Ray Wonsey was unaware that Roosevelt would become the longest-serving President in U.S. history or that that President would later be regarded by many scholars as one of the greatest Presidents of all time. Wonsey just loved to fly and his personal history includes some very interesting aviation highlights.

Ray Wonsey was born in 1896 in St. Clair, MI and after graduating from St. Clair High School in 1915, went on to study engineering at the University of Michigan for one year.

Enlisting in 1916, he was first stationed near Detroit, MI where he immediately requested flight training in the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps, Regular Army. Checking routinely on the status of that request, his acceptance was soon confirmed for ground school at Cornell University. Before traveling to New York by train, he was ordered to leave his overcoat behind as supply was short in Michigan. He was issued another at Cornell, but always remembered and often spoke of that very cold, long ride. At Cornell, he was taught the basics of flight, airplane operation and maintenance, meteorology, astronomy, discipline, and officer behavior.

In May 1917 he was sent to flight school at Fort Sam Houston, TX where the training airplanes were Curtiss-Wright Jennys. Upon graduation, instead of being sent to France where the American pilots had previously been instructed in combat training, he was sent to Rockwell Field, headquarters for the Air Service Flying School in San Diego, CA. There he received flight training and became a Reserve Military Aviator. The final stage advanced training had previously taken place in Europe because America lacked suitable airplanes and instructors for advanced and specialized flying. But the strategies had changed for training at the safer U.S. location. When his training was complete, he was ordered to remain and serve as a flight instructor with the Aero Squadron, providing advanced training for more incoming pilots. He was disappointed to stay stateside, but learned to like California.

He was billeted near the Hotel Del Coronado and ate there on special occasions. One evening he attended a party at which a young lady who arrived in an automobile asked if he would like to drive. He said “no thanks” without admitting he did not know how to drive - his father had never allowed him to drive the family car. He learned to fly before learning to drive.

To celebrate Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, all of the Aviation section Signal Corps planes on the West Coast of the U.S. came to San Diego to fly a victory formation of 225 planes. “I was supposed to lead a small formation of nine planes. But considerable confusion developed with so many aircraft in the air in a relatively small area. First one and then the other formations began tacking on to our formation and I eventually led them

all. Each lead plane had a radio so I called the commander who was supposed to be leading the formation. He said, "Go ahead Wonsey, you're doing just fine."

Serving as flight instructor in San Diego until the war ended, he was honorably discharged as Second Lieutenant and then returned home to Michigan.

Wonsey purchased a Jenny for \$500 and barnstormed for the next few years, attending county fairs and any other venue where he could safely take off & land and draw a crowd. He would perform stunts and had a partner named Lockwood who would wing-walk and hang below the airplane while in flight. They also offered rides for \$5 but to promote sales, he and Lockwood would sell chances for .50 cents. When ten chances were sold, a ticket would be drawn from a hat. Whenever the lucky winner returned with a big smile on his/her face, more riders @ \$5 were almost guaranteed.

In September 1920, he married Marguerite Grace Baird. Her 1918 Albion College yearbook, profile read "The maid with the **RAY**diant smile and the winning way, Marguerite has exceptionally **HIGH** ambitions. Pray don't divulge this **WonSey**-cret: she is determined to take her honeymoon in an aeroplane!". The Jenny was sold for \$400 when he went to work as a foreman in the motor department in the Wills Sainte Claire autoworks in Marysville, MI.

In 1926 he went to work for Ford, first as a factory mechanic and then as a pilot for trimotor flights & deliveries. During this time, he obtained his US Department of Commerce Aeronautics Branch Transport Pilot's License # 1385, issued November 16, 1927. One of his regular duties was to fly from Ford's Dearborn, MI plant to Chicago to pick up freight. On one return trip, he was asked to carry a passenger back to Dearborn. Notably, that gentleman was Charles Lindbergh, who had left his ship in Los Angeles and was hitching rides east. Both men of few words, they did not talk much, but Lindbergh flew right seat. Running into a rainstorm, the cockpit began leaking buckets: "raining outside, pouring inside" Wonsey would say. Although Wonsey offered his raincoat, Lindbergh refused to take it for himself, so they shared it, throwing it across their laps. After landing in Dearborn, Lindbergh did borrow the coat and Wonsey never saw it again. He would always laugh when telling this story.

In 1928, he was hired to fly for Colonial Airways on their Boston – NY route. The airline carried passengers, mail and freight from Newark Airfield and had offices in New York City. Colonial flew mail that came in from Transcontinental each morning and sometimes a second or third section would arrive later in the day. On his first trip, he was asked to fly a second delivery to Boston in an open cockpit Pitcairn Mail Wing. Returning from Boston in the afternoon, he landed in Hartford to ask about the weather. He decided to go ahead, a decision he came to regret. Before he got to Rye, the sky became so dark he could see the streetlights coming on below. Then rain began to fall and as the storm became worse, the engine magnetos got wet and he was losing power. The air was so rough, it was all he could do to keep the airplane flying and couldn't pay much attention to the compass direction. He couldn't see below and didn't know where he was, but knew he had to land soon. When the rain let up and he could see the ground again, all he could see were buildings everywhere and he realized he had crossed Long Island Sound and his position much farther east and south than expected. He took a compass course west, looking for any place to put the plane down, even the top of a long shed or large building. Then he spotted a park (which turned out to be Prospect Park) a green space below that appeared suitable for landing. He could see there were no people out and fortunately was able to land there safely. Pulling up to the end of the park, he tied the plane down to some trees. He found a police station was nearby and asked the Brooklyn police to keep an eye on the plane, telling them he'd return for it next day. Phoning the Colonial office in NY to let them know he'd landed safely, they asked "are you all right? Is the

airplane all right?” Answering yes, he was told to head home. He also learned the storm had been so violent it had wrecked a number of airplanes at the Long Island airfield, blowing them over and up against fences. Although he was new to NY and had never been into the City, he found his way back to Penn Station and then to NJ.

The next day, he and the mechanic who serviced the airplane drove to Prospect Park. Ray had never flown Pitcairns before the previous day and was counting on the mechanic to check it out thoroughly and make sure it was going to run. The mechanic did so and gave Wonsey the OK. Feeling uneasy, Wonsey was mindful of the buildings surrounding Prospect Park which were mostly 6-8 stories high and knew he would have to clear them. He ran up the engine once, let it idle and ran up again - and then the engine quit! He did not know the fuel tank had a standpipe to indicate low fuel. The mechanic then instructed him how to switch the valve to access the reserve fuel and he was able to fly out successfully and return to Newark.

As passenger traffic increased on the network of local air carriers that had become American Airways by January 1930, the Colonial Division was consolidated with other small airlines under C.R. Smith's direction. By 1931, Wonsey was Chief Pilot for American's Colonial Division at Newark and in 1932, he was assigned to fly Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the Democratic convention in Chicago on an American Airways Ford trimotor. This story told in more detail above, was widely publicized and the first commercial airline flight for FDR and his family.

In 1935, Wonsey took Mae West on a sightseeing hop over Long Island, NY. He didn't tell his wife about this flight until some time later. And when asked if she spoke her trademark line "Come up and see me sometime", he had to admit yes!

On one of the first passenger flights of the German zeppelin Hindenburg, the largest aircraft ever to fly, Wonsey was photographed at Lakehurst, NJ with its designer and chairman of Zeppelin, Dr. Hugo Eckner. American Airways had the contract to transport passengers arriving on the zeppelin from Lakehurst to Newark. On a later flight May 16th 1937 at 7:25 p.m., the zeppelin Hindenburg exploded while attempting to land in Lakehurst after a flight from Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany. The rear section of the hydrogen-filled zeppelin ignited as it was being secured to the mooring tower and it quickly became a massive ball of fire. Almost miraculously, fewer than 40 of the passengers on board were killed.

Wonsey had flown American's DC-3 scheduled to meet the zeppelin and witnessed the catastrophic burning of the Hindenburg upon its arrival. While the AA stewardess, a registered nurse, assisted injured passengers, Wonsey called the Newark office to alert them and was ordered to return to Newark, pick up medical help and carry them back to Lakehurst. However, help soon arrived in Lakehurst and that return trip was not necessary. Wonsey noticed a man who boarded the DC-3 and claimed to have jumped from the burning Zeppelin. The back of his coat was charred and his face was very red.

The Wonseys moved with American to Dallas-Fort Worth, TX in 1940 and again to Los Angeles, CA in 1944. Wonsey retired from American in 1956 and continued to live in Los Angeles until moving to Charlotte, NC in 1975. Unfortunately, he discarded his flight logs at that time. He passed away in 1985.

Thanks & acknowledgments:

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to tell Ray's story. Additional thanks to Norm Crabill and Linda Burdette for their help, encouragement & editorial input. Comments & questions are welcome: wonsey1@Juno.com

Note regarding Richard DuBose Tudor: an electrical engineer and Capt. in the Corps of Engineers, Marguerite's maternal grandfather was stationed in Norfolk in February 1942. Soon after, he and Col. Robert Neyland were assigned to work at Byrd Field from March to August 1942.

The FDR Albany-Chicago flight story is drawn from memories, Ray Wonsey's oral accounts and a written account penned by Richard Sanders Allen. For that story, other sources and thanks to:

- NASM abstracts: Dept of Comm/CAA/FAA file records.
- William T. Larkins, Pleasant Hill, CA, Larkins, author of "The Ford Story" (1958) discovered that the co-pilot of the Roosevelt Charter Flight to Chicago in 1932 was Fred Smith. Previous accounts, including those of American Airways personnel, had named the co-pilot as "Fred Clark", the name under which he flew at that time.
- Original material on the Roosevelt Charter Flight gathered by Ed Plaut of Greenwich, CT in 1964. Donated to and on file in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park, NY.



A Legend Never Dies

Linda Burdette

Albert Scott Crossfield was born in Berkeley, California on October 2, 1921 and grew up in California and Washington. His father was a petroleum chemist who carried the scars of World War I gas warfare and was an executive with Union Oil Co. Union Oil was probably one of the first corporations to have a business aircraft fleet and Carl Lienesch was one of the company pilots. Lienesch gave Crossfield his first flight at the age of six in an oil company plane, an Alexander Eaglerock. Lienesch always claimed that Crossfield fell asleep during the flight, but nevertheless that flight awoke in Crossfield a passion for aviation.

Lienesch hired Florence (Pancho) Barnes to promote company products, which she did while flying the Travel Air Mystery Ship racing airplane. Crossfield recalled wryly that his mother "seemed to have a dim view" of Pancho, but did allow young Scott to visit her Burbank, California airport hangar and learn about the aircraft. Scott, however, wanted to do more than fly such aircraft – his dream was to design, build, and fly as did his childhood heroes, famed test pilots Eddie Allen, Jim Doolittle, and Benny Howard.

Crossfield had the opportunity to see Eddie Allen make an early flight of the Boeing Clipper on Seattle's Lake Washington. The Crossfields had moved to southern Washington and Lienesch took high-school student Scott to the event. Lienesch emphasized that Allen was Boeing's consummate engineer as well as test pilot and told Crossfield "Allen's job is the one you want to shoot for. Be an engineer. Help build the airplanes. Then fly them and find out what you did wrong." One wonders if Lienesch had any idea the heights to which his protégé would take that philosophy.

Crossfield began flying lessons in 1933 at the age of 12, at a small airport in Wilmington, California in return for delivering newspapers and washing airplanes. The flying lessons were kept secret from his parents, who