

Will Rogers and Wiley Post

Photos and story courtesy of Renton Historical Society and Museum.

Pictured above are Will Rogers and Wiley Post while they check their Lockheed plane at the Renton airport prior to departing for Alaska in August 1935. A week later, shocking news came that the two died when their plane crashed in Alaska.



Second greatest American flyer next to Charles Lindbergh

Who are Will Rogers and Wiley Post? Many considered Wiley Post to be the second greatest American flyer next to Charles A. Lindbergh. He was born in 1899, near Grand Plains, Texas, and grew up in Oklahoma. Post and an Australian, Harold Gatty, went around the world in 1931. Post wore a distinctive patch over his left eye after he lost it in an oilrig accident. Two years later, Post made a solo flight around the world, becoming the first man to circumnavigate the earth twice in an aircraft. Post completed his first solo world flight in seven days, 18 hours and 49.5 minutes. Post retired the Winnie Mae, the plane used in his around-the-world flight, and purchased a new hybrid aircraft assembled from parts of two previously damaged ships.



Most popular actor in Hollywood

Will Rogers was born on November 4, 1879, in Indiana Territory, an area of land that later would become known as Oklahoma. As film star making over 70 movies, Rogers became famous through his syndicated column, which reached millions of his readers. As a young man, Will became an expert rider and "rope twirler," later starring in wild west shows, and Vaudeville around the world. He went to Hollywood in 1918, and started in many features and short films in silent cinema. In 1934 he was voted the most popular actor in Hollywood. Will Rogers was known for saying, "I never met a man I didn't like."

In 1935, Post and Rogers came to Renton Airport for installation of a set of Fairchild Edo 5300 pontoons, much like those used by Alaskan bush pilots. The special pontoons did not arrive on time and a pair of pontoons from a Fairchild 71 were installed—much heavier than what was required by Post's plane. Post and Rogers were anxious for the trip and kept the heavier pontoons. This was their first stop on their world pleasure trip.

Post Befriends Two Renton Teens

During Rogers and Post's first day at the Renton Airport (then called Bryn Mawr Air Field). Two teenagers watched the men ready the aircraft for flight. The next day, after taking some photos of the progress in fitting the huge Fairchild floats, the teenagers were able to talk to the famous flyer.

Wiley Post was short and stocky, very informal, and happy to answer all questions. The teenagers discovered that Post was taking off for Alaska later in the week. It would be the first segment of an around-the-world pleasure trip. Rogers probably had done as much as anyone in America to use and promote air travel, and many of his news columns featured his many air trips in various parts of the world.

The next day the teenagers were at the seaplane ramp to watch Wiley Post and mechanics from Northwest Air Services put final touches on the Orion Sirius Explorer, making her ready to take to the air. The teenagers asked Post what his plan was and how soon he would be ready to go. Post told them he would be ready in an hour, and not to wander away too far. "No chance of that!" the teenagers told him.

G. Williams brought his older brother with him on that day to make sure they witnessed all the activities, and had the airplane photographed from all angles. The teenagers chatted with Post just before he was ready to climb over the rear of the float and into the cockpit.

Flying with Post

The date was August 5, 1935, and the big red seaplane appeared ready to go as Post had a last-minute conference with the mechanics. Then he walked toward the Orion ready to board, turned around to the teenagers and said, "Hey, you boys want to go for a ride? I need ballast!" The mechanic handed out life jackets as the teenagers scrambled onto the right float and onto the wing, and Post said, "Sit in the rear seats to help weigh down the tail, as there isn't much load on board."

Post started the engine and peered from his seat up front. He asked, "Ready to go?" They assured him they were, gave a thumbs up and in a few seconds the crew cast off the lines and sent them on their way.

The first minute or so was slow taxiing to test water on the rudders and to warm up. It didn't seem like more than a few seconds before they smoothly left the surface and were in a shallow climb north over Lake Washington.

They flew north past Seward Park toward Seattle, climbing all the while. As Post did some shallow banks, the climb leveled off, and he tried a shallow dive. He felt out the controls and the handling of the Orion with the big twin floats attached. After more testing, they were near the north end of Lake Washington. By then, Post executed a 180-degree turn and headed back south along the east shore of the lake toward Renton. They were soon over land again, and Post throttled back. With a 180-degree turn, he positioned the aircraft for a landing just off the beach from which they had started some 45 minutes before. The landing was smooth and the deceleration rapid as Post turned toward the Bryn Mawr seaplane ramp (now Renton Airport) where the crew was waiting to tie them up.

While Post was still in the cockpit doing some last-minute checking, the teenagers scrambled across the wing and float and onto dry land. They still couldn't believe what had happened. When Post came ashore and asked them how they liked the ride, the teenagers told him it was wonderful, that he had a great airplane and they would be happy to send him some of their pictures. Post gave the boys his address in Oklahoma. The boys thanked him again and wandered off to take more pictures, still glowing with excitement from the trip.

The Around the World Trip Continues

Two days after the first test on the floats, Post got ready to depart from Renton. Will Rogers had arrived and was ready for a leisurely sightseeing tour across the Pacific and through Asia. The beautiful red Lockheed departed Seattle for Juneau, Alaska, on August 7. On August 9 they left for Aklavik, Northwest Territory (Canada). Along the way, weather conditions and good sightseeing detained them. Finally on August 15, the famous duo departed Fairbanks for Pt. Barrow to continue their world trip.

Eskimo seal hunters saw the red Lockheed fly low over their village of Walakpi and land in a tidal river flowing into the Arctic Ocean. Once on land, Post asked the direction to Pt. Barrow. One of the hunters pointed north across the featureless tundra. Post tinkered with the engine for a few minutes and Rogers chatted with the Eskimos. Then they started the engine, taxied across the river and took off in a steep, climbing turn.

Only fifty feet up the engine seemed to stop cold. The plane faltered, dragged a wing in the water and crashed on its back. One of America's most famous aviators with one of America's best-loved humorists had lost their lives in the

shallow water beside the Arctic Ocean on August 15, 1935.

A monument to Rogers and Post is currently located at the Renton Airport at the Seaplane Base dock area at the North end of the Renton Municipal Airport.