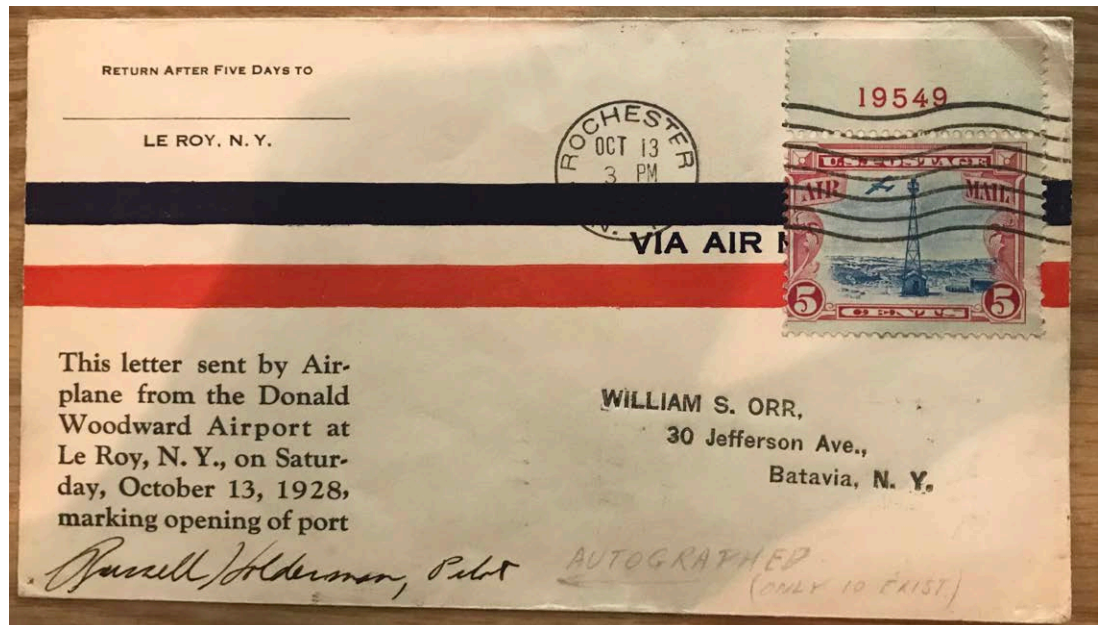


# Air Mail

by Lynne Belluscio

I stopped at the post office to pick up the mail and to buy some stamps and discovered the 100th anniversary airmail stamps and bought a couple hundred to use on the notices for the Donald Woodward Airport party on Sunday October 14. (More about that later.) In 1918, the first official air mail service in the United States was established. On May 15, 1918, the cities of Washington, Philadelphia and New York were linked by airmail service and became the first scheduled airmail service in the world. This was during World War I and a small group of Army pilots flew biplanes from city to city. A few months later, on August 12, the United States Post Office Department took control of the airmail service and continued until September 1, 1927. Transcontinental service was established in 1924. Eventually, airmail was flown by commercial airlines.

The pilots who flew the airmail routes risked their lives and many did not survive. A recent article in the May Smithsonian Magazine gives a vivid account of some of the escapades. Flying in the fog with no instruments. Getting lost because there were no good aviation maps. When the route opened to Chicago, the mountains of Pennsylvania claimed several pilots. Russ Holderman, who designed and managed the Donald Woodward Airport in LeRoy, was a mechanic with the Postal Service, waiting his turn to fly, and in his book "From Kittyhawk to the Moon" he writes about all the friends he lost flying the mail. Guys who chose to jump and be killed rather than burn to death. Some of the planes weren't equipped to carry cargo, and the mail was strapped into the second seat, instead of a passenger. Yet no matter what – the mail must go through. One pilot refused to fly because of the fog and was suspended. None of the other pilots would take his place, until he was reinstated,



*Air Mail envelope flown to Rochester on October 13, 1928 and stamped in Rochester at 3:00 pm. It arrived in Batavia the next day and was stamped at 11:30 am. The envelope was also signed by the pilot Russ Holderman.*

and for a short time, there was a pilots' strike.

In the fall of 1928, plans were coming together to open the Woodward Airport on Asbury Road on October 12, 13, and 14. Special envelopes were printed for the occasion and affixed with the new 5-cent airmail stamp, printed in two colors, red and blue, with the illustration of the beacon light on Sherman Hill in the Rocky Mountains in Wyoming. (An interesting note – the plane on the stamp is a monoplane because it was thought to look more modern, but the illustration was made from a photo of a bi-plane.) These beacon lights were placed across the country to provide nighttime navigation assistance for the mail planes before radio navigation. Some of the envelopes were canceled and mailed from the LeRoy post office. But one bag of mail was flown by Russ Holderman into Rochester where it was canceled there. A few of the envelopes were signed by Russ Holderman. The Historical Society has recently purchased over 150 of these canceled envelopes and will add them to the collection. Ten of them are signed.

Ten years later, in 1938, the U.S. post office declared "National Air Mail Week" from



*The envelope was first canceled in LeRoy at 2:30 pm on October 13, 1928. It was canceled again in Rochester at 3 pm and flown to Buffalo where it was stamped at 6pm.*

May 15-21. Over 200 small airports throughout New York State including Batavia, Caledonia, East Bloomfield, Leicester, North Chili, Perry and Wayland joined LeRoy by providing airmail service. LeRoy postmaster, John Gleason, had special envelopes designed which could be purchased at the post office, on May 19 until 1 hour before flight time. The special cache was picked up in LeRoy at 2 pm and the plane headed to Buffalo, making a stop in Batavia to pick up another cache. The plane was piloted by George Meglemere, with Otto Enderton as co-pilot. Otto had been at the D.W. Airport when it opened in 1928 and had been one of the two pilots that flew the Atlantic Ocean with Amelia Earhart.



*A canceled 1938 National Air Mail Week envelope from LeRoy.*



*Photo of an Airmail Stamp.*