

Pop Dickinson And His Airline's Short-Lived CAM 9 Service

1: INTRODUCTION

This Exhibit's purpose is to follow Charles "Pop" Dickinson, the first CAM 9 operator. It begins with his life as a wealthy Chicago farm seed dealer, shows his involvement in pioneer aviation & his founding of the Aero Club of Illinois—where he was President for 20 years— & his sponsorship of airshows. It shows every aspect of Dickinson Air Line & all CAM 9 flights, which suffered severe setbacks on their first day. The exhibit concludes with the first day of Dickinson Air Line's CAM 9 replacement, Northwest Airways, on October 1, 1926. NWA later merged with Delta.

CAM 9 was the ninth private commercial airline route in the U.S. This big event in Pop's life—the first—which was also unofficially the second to last—day of his Dickinson Air Line's CAM 9 operations on June 7, 1926, was the most important part of his aviation career & therefore is a substantial part of the exhibit. The exhibit shows all routes & covers flown—including the exhibitor's discovery covers—and displays original ephemera, while discussing the planes, pilots, & following the events of the failed first days of CAM 9. The rarity of covers & ephemera is quantified.

Air mail service of that first day extended to June 8 due to forced groundings & a fatal crash. After June 8, Dickinson Air Line no longer regularly carried air mail but ran irregular flights, though their contract didn't terminate until September 30. The exhibitor has discovered & shown the only known covers flown during those irregular flights.

EXHIBIT PLAN

Section 1: Introduction, Exhibit Plan, Legend.

Section 2: Before Airmail: History of Pop's Family Seed Business.

Section 3: Dickinson's early aviation & the Aero Club of Illinois.

Section 4: Dickinson Air Line's CAM 9 First Day Flights.***

***Grouped by Westbound Flights (CAM 9W) & Eastbound Flights (CAM 9E)

A: Westbound Flights from Chicago

1. Chicago to Milwaukee
2. Chicago to La Crosse
3. Chicago to St. Paul
4. Chicago to Minneapolis

B: Westbound Flights from Milwaukee

1. Milwaukee to La Crosse
2. Milwaukee to St. Paul
3. Milwaukee to Minneapolis

C: Westbound Flights from La Crosse

1. La Crosse to St. Paul
2. La Crosse to Minneapolis

D: Westbound Flights from St. Paul

1. St. Paul to Minneapolis

E: Eastbound Flights from Minneapolis

1. Minneapolis to St. Paul
2. Minneapolis to La Crosse
3. Minneapolis to Milwaukee
4. Minneapolis to Chicago

F: Eastbound Flights from St. Paul

1. St. Paul to La Crosse
2. St. Paul to Milwaukee
3. St. Paul to Chicago

G: Eastbound Flights from La Crosse

1. La Crosse to Milwaukee
2. La Crosse to Chicago



H: Eastbound Flights from Milwaukee

1. Milwaukee to Chicago

Section 5: Dickinson's CAM 9 After June 7 & the Only Known Covers Carried.

Section 6: Conclusion: Northwest Airlines' Startup & Dickinson Air Line's Demise.

LEGEND

- *Key Information is in italics.*
- **Examples of independent research: dark blue &** 
- Auxiliary Information is not within a box.
- **Rare items** are in a **Red Box** & Marked with a **Biplane** 



- *Minneapolis to St. Paul on the Crashed Plane of Elmer Partridge.*
- *Salvaged, later carried by Pilot Billy Brock.*
- *Franked: 8-cent Columbian Exposition on 2-cent U349 postal stationery.*

• **ONE OF SEVEN KNOWN CARRIED FROM MINNEAPOLIS TO ST. PAUL**



• *American Airmail Catalog states "There were no dispatches from St. Paul to Minneapolis or Minneapolis to St. Paul."*



• **Exhibitor's discovery:** These dispatches occurred. One of seven known from Minneapolis to St. Paul.



Receiving mark, SAINT PAUL, 4:30 p.m. June 7, 1926, proving exhibitor's discovery of dispatch from Minneapolis to St. Paul. 75% Scan.

1. Exhibit Overview, Purpose, Organization

This Exhibit's purpose is to follow Charles "Pop" Dickinson, who was the first CAM 9 operator. It begins with his life as a wealthy Chicago farm seed dealer, shows his involvement in pioneer aviation, follows his founding of the Aero Club of Illinois—where he was President for 20 years—and his sponsorship of airshows, then details his startup of Dickinson Air Line and its CAM 9 operation, which suffered severe setbacks on its first day and never fully recovered. The exhibit concludes with the first day of Dickinson Air Line's CAM 9 replacement, Northwest Airways. **Pop's airline startup and its CAM 9 contract was the biggest event in his life. The first—which was also unofficially the second to last—day of his CAM 9 operations on June 7, 1926, was the most important part of his aviation career & covers a substantial portion of the exhibit.** The problems associated with each pilot's flights are explained, as is the travel of each pilot's carried mail.

The Exhibit is organized chronologically, following Dickinson's seed business in the late 19th century, his pioneering airshow sponsorship, his founding of the Aero Club of Illinois, his backing of the ill-fated Lawson Air Line in 1919, then his startup of Dickinson Air Line in late 1925 and early 1926 after he made the lowest bid (48% of cost) to be awarded the CAM 9 contract. Section 4 shows CAM 9 routes and covers and is organized by flight sequence. All key covers are shown. Individual crash covers, signed covers, and rare covers are presented. Rates and routes are shown. A fatal crash occurred on Dickinson's first day of CAM 9. The mail of that first day extended to June 8 because of the crash and other flight groundings, and **after June 8, Dickinson Air Line no longer regularly carried air mail, but ran irregular flights.** Dickinson's government contract was terminated September 30. The exhibit concludes with the successful start on October 1, 1926 of Northwest Airways—the new CAM 9 contractor—and Pop Dickinson's retirement from air mail service with the termination of his contract. The story is told with covers, postcards, advertisements, original photos, news articles & photos, letters, typed cards, logos, maps & ephemera.

2. Importance

- A. The Contract Air Mail System (CAM) opened the door to privatize the carrying of air mail. In addition, it helped to speed the development of aviation in the USA, which made a huge impact on the rapid development of aviation worldwide.** CAM 9 was the ninth federally sanctioned commercial airline route in the U.S. and its Chicago to

Minneapolis route was one of five critical air routes in the country's fledgling commercial Air Mail Service started in 1926. Despite Dickinson's failure and short tenure as the first CAM 9 contractor, his operations opened the door for Northwest Airways' (NWA) success. NWA later became Northwest Airlines and eventually merged with Delta Airlines.

- B. Charles Dickinson was important in aviation:** He established the Aero Club of Illinois—second only to the Aero Club of America in its influence in early commercial and passenger aviation. He was the oldest licensed pilot in the U.S. These frames tell the complete story of his aviation and CAM 9 operations.

3. Knowledge, Original Research

The details of each failed flight have not been correctly documented by prior researchers. Investigating source materials (primarily witness statements and news stories), I uncovered the true disposition of the mail after pilot Elmer Partridge's fatal crash and found covers that were stated to not exist by *The American Air Mail Catalog (AAMC)*, the definitive resource, including covers mailed from Minneapolis to St. Paul and from St. Paul to Minneapolis. I discovered that Billy Brock—the pilot who took off from St. Paul for the trip east—flew to Minneapolis, dropped the St. Paul to Minneapolis mail, then witnessed Partridge's crash from the air and returned to Minneapolis to load recovered crash mail. **This mail recovery and air transport was documented by news reporting that I have uncovered from that time: For example, according to the *Kansas City Times*, June 8, 1926 "His (Partridge's) mail cargo was picked up by another plane... and carried to its destination."** Brock successfully carried that mail to Chicago, where mail terminating there received one set of postmarks (all on June 7) and mail being forwarded onward received a different set (some on June 8). I have shown that only some of Partridge's crash mail was sent by rail after the crash. That mail received a different time stamp in Chicago. **The AAMC states that ALL of Partridge's mail was transported by train, but my independent research shows this is NOT correct.**

I have—through my independent research—uncovered previously unknown information about the first day of CAM 9 flights. This information will correct misstatements about those CAM 9 flights that have been previously published.

I have authored an article on CAM 9 that was published in *The Airpost Journal*, March/April 2025. The

article includes details of Pop Dickinson's short-lived contract and I have included a QR code link to the article.

My exhibit shows covers that the *American Air Mail Catalog* (AAMC) says do not exist. My research will effect changes to that reference in the future. My independent research also shows that—despite Dickinson's CAM 9 being stated as having ceased on June 8, 1926, they continued CAM 9 flights with an irregular schedule through September. I have provided proof by finding and showing the only known covers flown on four flights Dickinson made after the failures of June 7 and 8. **The information I have gathered that proves the AAMC has been incorrect on the flights has never before been published.**

4. Material Rarity & Challenge

Though common First Flight Covers are not rare, there are significant exceptions for Pop's CAM 9 flight covers. I have presented one of only six known CAM 9 covers carried from St. Paul to Minneapolis by pilot Billy Brock and two of only six known covers carried from Minneapolis to St. Paul and onward after Partridge's crash. After Pop gave his 45-day notice to the USPOD, mail was infrequently flown by Dickinson Air Line on the CAM 9 route, despite their CAM contract obligations. I have shown the only four known covers carried, on four different flight days, after June 8 during the period where Pop's CAM contract was still valid and yet Dickinson Air Line only irregularly flew mail on the route. Those dates

5. Changes to the Exhibit

- In late 2025 I reduced the size of the exhibit to 3 frames to achieve greater balance.
- In early 2026 I acquired one additional previously unknown flight cover carried by Dickinson Air Line on June 15, during the time they had ceased regular CAM flights.
- In 2026 I reformatted the exhibit to better identify rarity, show author research & incorporate a new discovery cover.
- After the 2026 Rocky Mtn Stamp Show I made further format and photo ID changes suggested by the jury.

6. References

Wasserman, Dr. Bruce. 2025. "The Little Route That Couldn't: The Short Life of the Minneapolis to Duluth CAM 9 Spur." *The Airpost Journal*. March/April 2025.

(See QR Code, below).

Northwest Airlines History Center. n.d. "Timeline – 1920s."

<https://northwestairlineshistory.org/timeline-1920s>

Libby, Justin. 2012. "North Star Rising." American Aviation Historical Society.

<https://www.aahs-online.org/pubs/journals/files/571024.pdf>

Bureau of Aircraft Accidents Archives. 2024. "Crash of a Laird LC-B in Mendota: 1 Killed."

<https://www.baaa-acro.com/crash/crash-laird-lc-b-mendota-1-killed>

Associated Press. 1926. "Death in Air Mail Crash." June 8, 1926, Pg 2.

Kansas City Times. (See Clipping, RIGHT).

U.S. Air Mail Schedules, Transcontinental Route, 1926.

Published by Arthur C. Lueder, Postmaster—Chicago, Illinois.

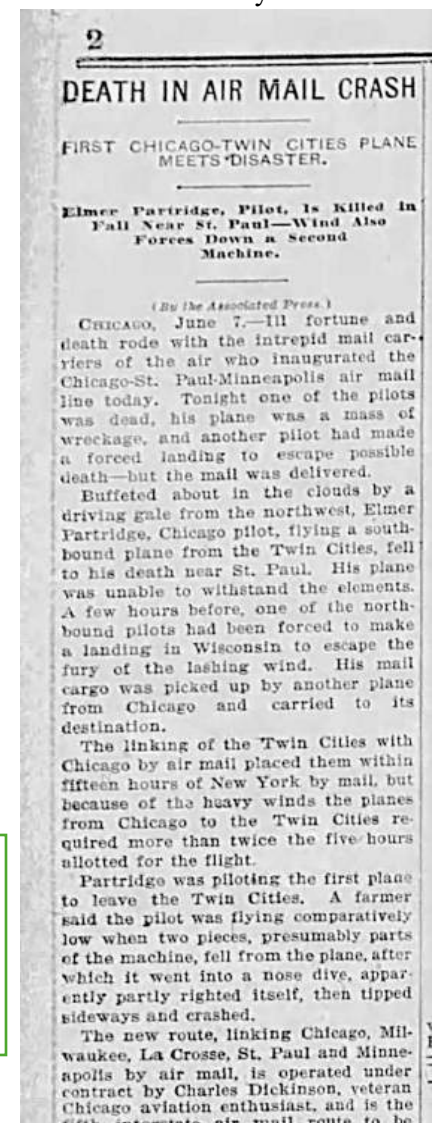
were Jun 15, July 3, August 10, and September 18, which was twelve days before Pop's CAM contract expired.

And though the AAMC states that Pilot Matty Laird took Pilot Keller's mail from Milwaukee to La Crosse, I have acquired a unique, original typed card—the only one known to exist—typed by Pilot H. Keller and mailed to a contemporaneous collector—that explains Keller's role as a relief pilot replacing Dan Kaiser, stating that he (Keller) carried Kaiser's mail to Minneapolis. This shows the AAMC's statement about Matty Laird's role to be incorrect. Relief Pilot Matty Laird never flew mail on June 7 or 8.

I have shown the only known Elmer Partridge crash cover signed by pilot Billy Brock. I have also shown a Northwest Airway's commercially carried cover, without cachet, postmarked on October 1, 1926—their first day as the new CAM 9 service provider.

5. Material Condition

I have been careful to choose material in the best condition available. In some cases, letters carried in mail sacks in front of the pilot in an open biplane will show oil spots. This is because the mail was in canvas sacks directly behind the engine exhaust, which spewed out oil when running due to total loss lubrication systems which expelled oil in the exhaust fumes.



[QR Code for my article on CAM 9](#)

A. ADDENDUM: Updates to the exhibit as of May 19, 2026

- 1. Census—Exhibitor Discovery:** Because I have been keeping an ongoing cover census, [I have updated the number of previously unknown flight covers](#) associated with Pop Dickinson’s CAM 9 contract. Sources searched include Auctions, eBay, Worthpoint, Dealer Bourses. This information has not been published elsewhere. They are:

Section Cover	Census Number
4E1- Minneapolis to St. Paul	7
4D1- St. Paul to Minneapolis	16
5 June 15, 1926	1
5 July 3, 1926	1
5 August 10, 1926	1
5 September 18, 1926	1

- 2. Remounting:** The exhibit categories have been made easier to follow by matching the numbers of the headings and subheadings of the Plan with each corresponding section.
- 3. Rarity:** All rare items have been quantified as to numbers known or reported. Red boxes have been placed around all rare items to make them easy to identify
- 4. Simplification:** The Legend items have been simplified to make the exhibit easier to follow. The Introduction has been shortened and limited to essential points, with a clearly stated purpose.
- 5. Organization:** The exhibit has been reorganized to follow its stated purpose.

B. Exhibitor Discovery Items as of May 19, 2026

- 1. Legend Page:** [One of only 7 known crash covers](#) carried by Pilot Billy Brock from Minneapolis to St. Paul.
- 2. Section 2, Page 3:** A Dickinson Reply Envelope, unused, Scott U364, from 1899. [Only recorded example.](#)
- 3. Section 4 D1:** One of 16 recorded covers flown from St. Paul to Minneapolis. [These covers are also an exhibitor discovery, as the most-cited reference, the American Air Mail Catalog states “There were no dispatches from Saint Paul to Minneapolis or Minneapolis to Saint Paul.”](#)
- 4. Section 4 E1:** The transfer of mail from Pilot Elmer Partridge’s eastbound plane to Pilot Billy Brock’s plane has previously been unknown. [Exhibitor discovered this transfer by a study of both contemporary witness accounts and postmarks.](#) Explanation below:

The American Air Mail Catalog in Interrupted Flights & Covers 26.5, states: *“All Mail, 170 lbs., salvaged undamaged and was forwarded by train to Chicago where is was backstamped June 8, 10:00 pm.”* My research of both postmarks as well as contemporary witness accounts published in local news media after the crash shows that statement to be incorrect. I have shown a number of covers that have the magenta 2:10 pm Minneapolis Partridge cachet (his crash mail) that have June 7 arrival marks in Chicago. This agrees with witness accounts that mail was transferred to Billy Brock’s plane.

- 5. Section 4 A3:** Commercially used FDC carried by Nimmo Black, arriving in St. Paul on June 7 at 6:00 p.m. Addressed to J.E. Mansfield, care of Frank McBride, the superintendent of the Tenth Division of the Railway Mail Service (RMS) Railway Mail Service. Mansfield was a roving postal inspector. Only reported cover to RMS on first day of CAM 9.
- 6. Section 4 A4:** An [original typed note](#) from Pilot H. C. Keller explaining how he picked up the mail from Dan Kaiser’s forced-down plane and transported it to its destination. This is [the only one in existence](#). Recovered from a contemporaneous (1920s) collector’s letters.
- 7. Section 4 E4:** The [only recorded Partridge crash cover signed by Pilot Billy Brock](#), then carried by Brock to Chicago.
- 8. Section 5 Page 1:** [Only recorded cover](#) carried on CAM 9 on June 15, 1926
- 9. Section 5 Page 2:** [Only recorded cover](#) carried on CAM 9 on July 3, 1926
- 10. Section 5 Page 3:** [Only recorded cover](#) carried on CAM 9 on August 10, 1926
- 11. Section 5 Page 3:** [Only recorded cover](#) carried on CAM 9 on September 18, 1926
- 12. Section 6 Page 1:** [Only recorded first day commercial use cover](#) for Northwest Airways (NWA), the new CAM 9 carrier, on October 1, 1926.