

VIA BALLOON JUPITER

By JERRY MARLETTE

Air mail--generally considered to be an innovation of the post World War I era--has a good start on its second hundred years. Just over a hundred years ago, on August 17, 1859, a small, one-man balloon rose from the Courthouse Square at Lafayette, Indiana, carrying a pouch marked "U.S. Mail." The balloon's destination was New York City--its mission, the world's first official airmail flight.

While this tiny airship seems almost laughably puny when compared with today's aircraft, which exceed the weight carried and the distance traveled on that first flight more than a hundredfold, the flight itself is not to be taken lightly. A milestone in two fields, aeronautics and postal service, it was not a publicity stunt but a carefully planned experiment by the outstanding aeronaut of the day, Professor John Wise of Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

A school teacher and scientist turned professional balloonist, the 51 year old Wise had made a careful study of the latest developments in the field both in the United States and Europe, followed by over 200 experimental flights of his own. He soon realized that while ballooning could rightly be called dangerous, there was little actual danger while in free flight.

Most personal injuries and property damage occurred after landing, when the wind dragged the balloon over obstacles on the ground before the bag could be completely collapsed. To overcome this problem, he invented the rip cord, which, when pulled, opened an entire panel of the balloon, thereby allowing rapid deflation.

Among Prof. Wise's advanced beliefs was one that held that at an altitude of around 12,000 feet, a balloonist would find winds similar to the trade winds, constantly blowing in one direction, and that sustained voyages could thus be made. Since these winds would follow the general trade wind pattern, in the north central latitudes they could be expected to blow from west to east. Thereby, they made possible flights from the midwest to the eastern seaboard and, if a balloon of sufficient size were used, from the United States to Europe.

To prove this theory, Wise formed the Trans-Atlantic Balloon Company early in 1859 and set as his first goal, the transportation of cargo from St. Louis to New York City. On July 1, 1859 he and John La Mountain (who was later to become the outstanding civilian balloonist with the Union Army during the Civil War) departed St. Louis with a private sack of letters and light cargo for New York. The balloonists made good time until a severe



The balloon Jupiter in the Lafayette Square, August 16, 1859. A moment after this picture was taken the balloon was released and sailed to the outskirts of town. (Photo Courtesy of Tippecanoe County Historical Association.)

PROGRAMME
FOR THE GRAND
BALLOON
ASCENSION,
and
Trans-Continental Voyage,
BY PROFESSOR WISE.
 To take place from
LAFAYETTE,
on
Tuesday, Aug. 16, 1859.

At 12 M. the mammoth Trans-Continental Air-Ship will be brought to the ground for inflation. At 12½, the gas will be let on under the direction of Mr. Collier; and the inflation and management of the Air-Ship will be conducted by Mr. John Wise, and Chas. E. Wise, Jr., assisted by the Committee of Management.

At 3 P. M., the car will be harnessed on the Jupiter and in grand procession, preceded by a good band of music, the Air-Ship, with its voyager, will be towed to the Public Square.

Arrived at the Public Square (should the atmosphere permit) Prof. Wise will make a short address preparatory to a long voyage.

At 3 P. M., the final preparations of ballast, provisions, grapnels, index paper, fire-bellows, letter-bag, express mail, the charter of greeting from Lafayette to her sister cities of the East, being completed, the Jupiter will be freed from her mooring, and, with her veteran Captain, let free into the region of the upper air, to make her mission to the East.

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storm caught them over eastern Lake Ontario, and they had to throw everything overboard to keep from sinking into the lake. Fortunately, they were blown shoreward and finally landed near Henderson, New York, some 20 hours after leaving St. Louis. This 809 mile flight, incidentally, remained a balloon distance record until 1900.

Undaunted by this near disaster, Wise began making plans for another attempt. Several Lafayette businessmen expressed interest in sponsoring the next flight, and the U. S. Post Office agreed to designate Wise as an official carrier for the trip. With great fanfare the proposed ascension was scheduled for three o'clock in the afternoon of Tuesday, August 16, 1859.

The morning of the big day dawned warm and clear, and by ten A.M. Lafayette was packed with a crowd estimated at double its normal 9,000 population. Farmers, townspeople and several thousand Sunday School children brought in by excursion trains from points as far as 60 miles away all milled around the center of town. Some picknicked in a large grove near the Courthouse Square and some crowded around the gas works to watch the balloon, the "Jupiter", being inflated.

Shortly before two P.M. the inflation was completed, and the wicker basket was attached to the bag. A giant parade formed to escort Jupiter to the Square, led by the Lafayette Band and the town's crack military unit, the Lafayette Guards, resplendent in blue uniforms and plumed hats. Behind the Guards, pulled by a dozen strong men, came the Jupiter with Prof. Wise in the basket, smiling and waving to the cheering thousands of children and adults.

About halfway along the route the procession was halted because of some unremoved telegraph wires. Following a biting commentary by Wise on the ascension committee's failure to remove all wires as promised, an attempt was made to raise Jupiter over the wires. Unfortunately, during the complicated maneuvering she got away from her ropes, and to prevent injury to the dense crowd or damage to the balloon itself from the adjacent high buildings, Wise let her rise some three or four thousand feet before pulling the valve to let out gas and return to the ground. Landing about half a mile from the starting point, the balloon was then towed to the Courthouse Square where it was discovered that the valve had been damaged and that gas was fast escaping. Wanting to get the balloon out of the tightly packed crowd as quickly as possible, Wise waited only long enough for the official photograph to be taken, then had his son Charles ascend. Young Wise also rose to about 3,000 feet and landed on the outskirts of town.

Towing the balloon back to the gas works, Wise hauled down the top and found one of the India rubber springs had snapped. Flipping in under the valve clapper, it had jammed the valve into a partly-opened position thereby allowing a slow but steady release of gas. The trouble was soon corrected, and the balloon was left standing overnight with the announcement that the ascension would be made at two P.M. the following day from the gas works.

By noon on Wednesday, the 17th, the Jupiter was again ready. Inflated to three-fourths capacity her basket was loaded with some 350 pounds of equipment, including sand ballast, a Smithsonian Institution barometer, thermometer, chemically-treated paper to test for ozone in the upper atmosphere, a parachute and provisions. Her cargo included the mail pouch with 123 letters and 23 circulars, a fresh bottle of Artesian water from the new well in the Lafayette Square, advertising matter extolling the water's advantages, and copies of the Lafayette Daily Courier describing the flight.

Promptly at two, Jupiter was released from her moorings and rose in almost dead calm air. Passing quickly through the summer cumulus clouds over the city, the balloon leveled off at about 8,000 feet and hovered, motionless, for more than an hour. Wise made barometric and temperature readings, observed the color changes in the test paper, and made notes in his log.

Finally, after passing under some higher clouds had cooled the top of the bag, the balloon dropped through the clouds into clear air around 6,000 feet. Wise then dropped some ballast, and Jupiter rose to near 10,000 feet. From that altitude, scattered glimpses of the ground through the clouds showed the Wabash River as a crooked thread and the city of Lafayette as a large dark area far below. Sounds, however, were exceptionally clear--a dull rumble from below was finally identified by Wise as the usual city noises coming from Lafayette, and railroad trains sounded like mill dams.

Wise's log reveals many inner thoughts of the veteran aeronaut as he waited high above Lafayette for a breeze to start him on his way eastward. "If I can't make a trip East, I will make one somewhere else. I feel rejoiced--invigorated--extremely happy! God is all around me. The manifestations around me make me rejoice in exclamation and admiration of God's exalted handiwork. Glorious reverie--this feeling is worth a lifetime's laudation of a thousand mile trip."

The cause of these cogitations Wise attributed to "the atmosphere which, as it diminishes, causes the animal system to expand, producing exhilaration, making the brain more active, the blood circulate more rapidly, and the organs of the five senses become energetic and more acute." At these times Wise had always determined to publish a full log of his statements and exclamations brought forth with such "insuppressible spontaneity", but on his return to earth "the exhilaration had always disappeared, to be replaced with a body soaking languor." (Ramblings of a dreaming mind? Hardly. This was the 233rd ascent of the man who was America's outstanding aeronaut for over 40 years, a man who made 440 flights between 1835 and his death by drowning during a forced landing in Lake Michigan in 1879.) On this flight, however, he finally did keep a complete log, and the quotes here are excerpts therefrom.

After about an hour and a half the balloon finally picked up a slight breeze and began to drift slowly, not east, but southwesterly. Just before four o'clock Jupiter hit another layer of cool air and sank rapidly. Wise shoveled out considerable sand, and finally arrested his descent at 4,000 feet. While pondering his next move, he became aware of sounds below--the chopping of wood, cowbells ringing and shouting. Letting out more gas, he descended to within a few feet of the ground some 16 miles south of Lafayette.

The balloon was soon surrounded by some 30 astonished people--men, women and children--who timidly accepted Wise's gifts of bread slices for the children and pamphlets describing the Lafayette Artesian well water for the adults (possibly the world's first aerial advertising). After about 20 minutes Wise dropped a small amount of sand and, with a wave of his small American Flag, rose again into the hot summer sky.

Still there was no easterly wind current, even though he rose to over 14,000 feet where the temperature stood at 53 degrees (it was 94 on the ground) and his ears and the base of his brain began to ache. In the midst of his meditations he was brought sharply back to reality by Jupiter's rope network slipping from a too tight condition around to a looser position. Caused by great distension of the bag, this thunderous-sounding action reminded Wise that he had best give thought to the coming night.

His situation was not critical or was it comfortable, considering the long distance ahead of him. Having only some 50 pounds of sand ballast left, most of which would soon be expended to compensate for the condensation of the gas following the setting of the sun and the consequent cooling of the bag, an all night sail was out of the question. Therefore, he began to look for a suitable place to land.

Spotting a town through the clouds to the east, Wise quickly identified it by reference to his chart as Crawfordsville and planned a landing within its limits. Wishing to add interest to his arrival, he fashioned a

parachute from a muslin sheet nine feet square and tied a fifteen foot string to each corner. Tying these strings together in a large knot, he attached the mail sack and threw the entire unit overboard. The pouch had dropped only a few hundred feet when it began to drift slowly southward, and Wise pulled Jupiter's valve to follow. Regulating the descent of the balloon to that of the chute, the two descended slowly together to a landing 50 feet apart in the dust of the public road six miles south of Crawfordsville at just after 6:30 P.M. The pouch was quickly delivered to the U. S. Mail agent on the New Albany and Salem Railroad at Crawfordsville and was on its way to New York on the next train.

Since the flight fell far short of its goal, probably the only result of consequence was Prof. Wise's complete record of barometric and temperature readings throughout the ascension. He also accomplished the first recorded detection of the presence of ozone in the upper air (the idea and the test papers were furnished by Dr. Charles M. Wetherill, Lafayette analytical chemist).

Historians have long argued the validity of this flight's claim to being the first to officially carry air mail. Technically, it was a success in that the mail did fly. Practically, it was a failure inasmuch as it did not reach its original destination by air. The balloon's only disadvantage was that it had no control over its travels, and successful air mail had to wait until 1918, although regular delivery of mail by plane was conducted for two weeks in England in September 1911 and for ten days later that same month in the United States. Still, there are several factors which verify the official claim. All mail for the flight was required to be marked "Via Balloon Jupiter", deposited by noon on the 16th and prepaid. The mail was received by the Lafayette postmaster, Thomas Wood, and sealed in a brass-locked mail bag. Finally, the mail was delivered to the postal agent at Crawfordsville, notice of its arrival was given the Lafayette office and final delivery in New York was completed.

Prof. Wise's flight has had several commemorative observations. The first, on May 19, 1938, the twentieth anniversary of U. S. airplane mail, featured the flight of a Purdue University Waco F with 2204 letters and four passengers from Lafayette to Indianapolis. A special rubber stamp was used on the letters (covers) on the flight, as was done August 17, 1939, to mark the Third Annual Exhibit of the Lafayette Philatelic Society.

By far the greatest celebration, however, was the 100th Anniversary at Lafayette on Monday, August 17, 1959. In recognition of the flight's "first" claim, and in celebration of its centennial, the U. S. Post Office Department issued a special 7 cent Air Mail Balloon Jupiter Commemorative stamp. As a result the Lafayette Post Office was deluged. More than 344,000 stamp and cover requests from all over the world were piled in every available space, and 44,200 "Jupiter" stamps were sold across the counter during the day. Following dedication of a plaque at the Post Office by Indiana Congressman Charles Halleek, some 12,000 pieces of mail were loaded into a helicopter in a blocked off parking lot and flown across the Wabash River to West Lafayette and the Purdue University Airport. There they were trans-shipped to a Lake Central Airlines DC-3.

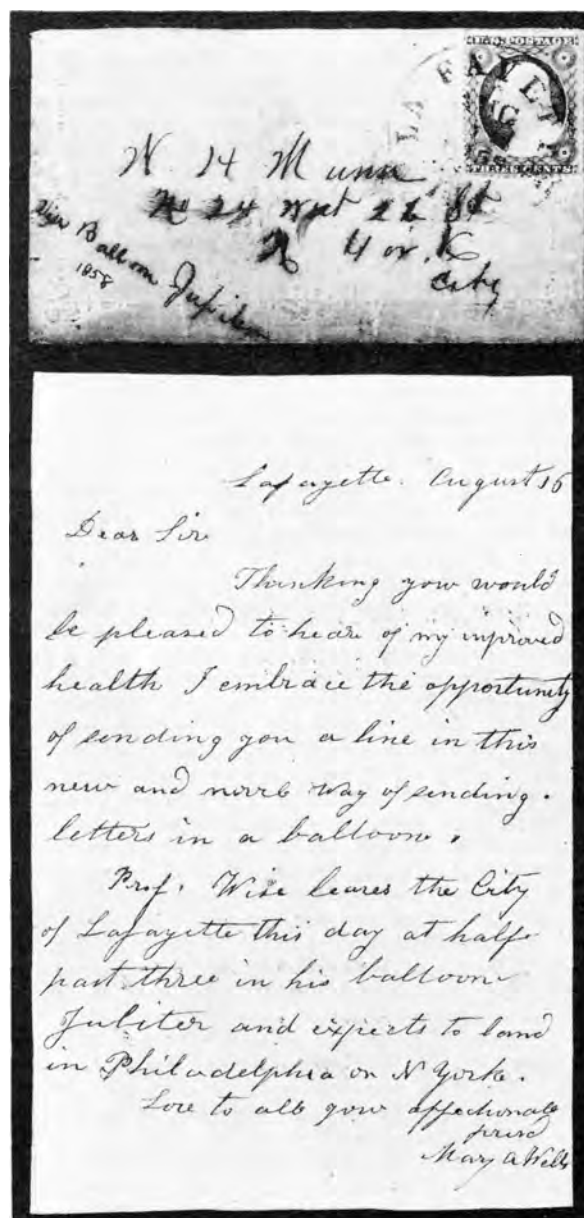
The balloon theme was furthered that afternoon when a modern balloon, named "Jupiter" and flown by famed balloonist Don Piccard, took off from the Wabash River levee just after five P.M. with a load of 123 letters and 23 health circulars (the same quantity as had been carried 100 years before). Each piece of mail was stamped with the "Jupiter" stamp and carried the legend, "100th Anniversary, August 17, 1959, Via Jupiter, D. Piccard, balloonist." Each was also autographed and bore a serial number. The flight, a token one, headed northeast, and landed an hour later on a farm four miles out of town.

For years stamp collectors and aviation historians

have searched for covers from the Jupiter flight, with no success. Reportedly, only one was still in existence and was kept in seclusion by its owner. Its value was rumored at anywhere from one to twenty thousand dollars, if it could be bought. Then, in November 1964, the priceless cover was placed at auction and was bought for \$6,500 by the Smithsonian Institution for public display. A reproduction of both the cover and the letter appears below.

Thus, in the second 100 years of air mail service, well might today's ocean-spanning jets dip a wing in tribute to this intrepid ancestral team--Professor John Wise and the tiny Jupiter--who, although years ahead of their time, took the first faltering step toward achievement of the service we take so for granted today.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This delightful article, telling of one of the earliest achievements of U. S. aviation, was written by Jerry Marlette of 1677 Lincoln Blvd, Indianapolis, Indiana. It is based on his researches in Indiana aeronautical history, especially material in the files of the Tippecanoe County Historical Association, Lafayette.



Cover (above) and letter sent on the Jupiter flight of August 17, 1859. (Photo - Smithsonian Institution)