HUGH ROBINSON’S FLIGHT DOWN THE MISSISSIPPI
The Tribulations of an Early Aviator

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ONE OF THE USES of history is to give perspective to present problems and let us learn that, however frustrating an episode may be, others have likely had similar experiences. To those who fly in 1988, the annoyances and difficulties form a familiar litany of delays, crowds, and things just not going the way they are planned. One of the first attempts to make a long-distance flight originated in Minneapolis and, to a modern air traveler, the tribulations that ensued seem, at one and the same time, familiar and charmingly antiquated.

Many air shows and exhibition flights were staged in the United States during 1910 and 1911, and they had the effect of popularizing aviation and stirring the public imagination with flight. As with the space program 60 years later, however, the public quickly became jaded. People were no longer content simply to see an airplane fly; they expected ever more daring feats from aviators, who responded by pushing their machines to greater speed, altitude, and endurance records.

Minnesota was the starting point for one such distance record attempt, a flight from Minneapolis to New Orleans. The two cities are slightly more than 1,900 miles apart, and when the flight was proposed, no aircraft had even come close to flying that far. The idea for the venture originated with a group of businessmen who had formed the St. Louis Aero Club. In August, 1911, Spearman Lewis, representing that group, visited Minneapolis to present a proposal to Harry A. Tuttle, the president of the Minneapolis Commercial Club. A prize of between $15,000 and $20,000 would be raised to pay an aviator to make a flight down the Mississippi. Cities along the way would contribute to the fund, and it was expected that business would prosper when thousands of people flocked to see the flyer land and take off as, town by town, he worked his way south. To add an element of practicality to the enterprise, a few pounds of mail would be carried.

As the northernmost major city on the great river, Minneapolis was the logical starting point, and Tuttle agreed that his organization would raise $3,000 by the second week in September. In mid-September it was announced that a total of $15,000 had been pledged by businessmen in Minneapolis, St. Louis, Lansing, Iowa, and Quincy and Cairo, Illinois.

The aviator hired to make the flight was Hugh A. Robinson, and there would seem to be several reasons for his selection. There were relatively few people who could fly in 1911, and Robinson was a prominent mem-

1 Here and below, see Minneapolis Journal, Sept. 11, 1911, p. 12. For an account of aviation’s pioneering years and the early air shows, see Sherwood Harris, The First To Fly (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970). The first air show in Minnesota is described in Gerald N. Sandvick, “The Birth of Powered Flight in Minnesota,” Minnesota History 48 (Summer, 1982): 47–59.

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ber of the Glenn Curtiss exhibition team. During 1910 he was one of the Curtiss pilots who had done pioneering work in building and flying “hydroplanes,” as pontoon-equipped aircraft were then known. The fact that the 30-year-old flyer was a Missouri native probably did not hurt his selection either. The start of the flight was set for mid-October, a fact dictated by Robinson’s heavy exhibition flying schedule, which was typical for the showman-flyers of the age. From mid-September to mid-October he made flights at McAlester, Oklahoma, Williston, North Dakota, Chanute, Kansas, Dubuque, Iowa, Houghton Lake, Michigan, Evansville, Indiana, Sedalia, Missouri, Muskogee, Oklahoma, and St. Louis.

Soon after the whole plan was made public, a disagreement arose. Since he would fly a Curtiss “Hydro” aircraft, Robinson wanted to take off from the river. The Hydro was a standard Curtiss biplane of the period on which the wheels had been replaced by pontoons, and it “has no runners for alighting on the land.” The promoters wanted a departure from Lake Calhoun so that more of Minneapolis would be overflown with a commensurate increase in publicity. Robinson was darkly suspicious of getting too far from water but was finally convinced that so many lakes dotted the area that his safety margin would be preserved. He relented but still planned to take a train ride along the river to inspect the route. “I have no idea how long a flight to New Orleans will take,” Robinson observed. “I shall fly at an average height of 1,000 feet . . . . My machine makes sixty miles an hour and can maintain that speed.”

The start was now set for October 13, a Friday. Five days earlier his aircraft was test flown at St. Louis and then dismantled, crated, and shipped by rail to Minneapolis. The aviator himself arrived at the Radisson Hotel on October 10 and announced that, since his machine would carry 18 gallons of gasoline good for about

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**THIS CARTOON, which appeared in the Minneapolis Tribune, October 12, 1911, is indicative of the awe engendered by early aviation feats such as Robinson’s flight.**
A CROWD OF ONLOOKERS gathered on the bridge at Lake Calhoun to witness the takeoff of Hugh Robinson in his hydroplane en route to New Orleans.

200 miles, he hoped to make it to Prairie du Chien on the first day. A disturbing note was sounded when he said that New Orleans was slow in coming up with its share of the money, but he declared himself ready to go as soon as he got the $3,000 from Minneapolis.¹

On October 11 Robinson made a test flight of his reassembled airplane, and an estimated 25,000 people ringed Lake Calhoun to see him go aloft for 13 minutes. “I chose Calhoun for a start,” he explained, “so, in case of winds, to have a lake on either side.” His aircraft, emblazoned with the number 13 and the words “Minneapolis Makes Good,” functioned perfectly. The morning of Friday the 13th saw stiff winds; however, at 9 o’clock Robinson lifted from the lake. He circled for eight minutes, but it was extremely hard going and the winds forced him back down to the immense disappointment of the 35,000 citizens who had turned out to see the historic departure. At 1:00 P.M. Robinson, tired of waiting for the wind to abate, caught a taxi back to the Radisson. Near Summit and Hennepin the taxi collided with a streetcar and sustained substantial damage. The uninjured Robinson, whose day it had just not been, scrambled from the taxi and opined that automobiles were a “very dangerous” form of transportation.²

After the bad luck of Friday the 13th, the weekend weather turned to fog and rain that persisted to Monday. Robinson busied himself fine tuning his aircraft. He made another brief test hop, strengthened the pontoons, installed a slightly larger gas tank, and waited for the weather to co-operate.³

AT LAST, on October 17, the sun rose in a clear sky. A quick preflight check showed that all was ready. As the eight-cylinder engine ticked flawlessly, Robinson shoved a roll of tape into his pocket and lifted from Lake Calhoun’s surface at 9:02 A.M. Climbing to 1,000 feet, he flew over St. Paul and set a course for Hastings. At 10:05 he passed over Red Wing, “where the entire populace of the city was on hand,” and reached Wabasha at 10:30. Shortly before 11:00 he ran out of fuel and landed on the river a few miles north of Winona. He had covered 110 miles in 89 minutes, but the landing had damaged a pontoon. The rest of the day and all the next were spent making repairs in Winona.⁴

The most spectacular day in Robinson’s odyssey was Thursday, October 19. Five thousand residents of the Winona area came to watch him take off shortly after 8:00 A.M. The crowd was treated to an unplanned bit of daring when, after avoiding a sightseeing boat, the pilot could not gain altitude. The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad bridge was looming in his path. His only choice was to fly under it, which took a bit of skill since the height from the water to the bridge deck was but 25 feet.⁵

Robinson reached La Crosse in 25 minutes and stopped long enough to drop off a small packet of mail.

² Minneapolis Journal, Oct. 11, 12, 13, 1911, all p. 1.
and have coffee and rolls at a local cafe. The weather was clear with light breezes as he winged his way from La Crosse toward Prairie du Chien. Although a bolt fell out of his steering system, the aircraft remained controllable, and at Prairie du Chien Robinson dropped in "as gracefully as a bird on the wing." He had lunch, and proceeded with the business of flying down the Mississippi. Swirling air currents near Guttenburg, Iowa, created a momentary problem, but by midafternoon he had landed at Dubuque where he spent the night. He had flown an astonishing 160 miles in a single day.

The technical side of the flight was now going smoothly, but disaster was looming on the financial side. After landing at Rock Island, Illinois, Robinson got word that the St. Louis promoters had not raised their promised $2,000, and that several other cities seemed to be dragging their feet. Brief and bitter negotiations by telegraph led nowhere, and on Saturday, five days and 380 miles from Minneapolis, Robinson flatly refused to fly another mile without pay and cancelled the flight.

Minneapolis promoter Tuttle demanded a flight to New Orleans or a refund of his city's $3,000. The St. Louis Aero Club professed shock at the aviator's "arbitrary action." For his part, Robinson refused to negotiate any further and ordered his airplane crated and shipped to Oklahoma, saying "My time can be more profitably spent in exhibition work than in a flight merely for glory."

The first attempt to fly the length of America's greatest of rivers thus ended abruptly and on a sour note. The problem had been that merchants along the way were mainly interested in the money spent by out-of-town folks coming in to see the airplane pass through. Businessmen, quite naturally, wanted Robinson to adhere to a set schedule. From the pilot's point of view, however, this was an impossible demand. Delays due to weather and mechanical problems were absolutely unavoidable. The delay in departing Minneapolis and further schedule slippage en route had rendered promises of arrival times meaningless. To Robinson, the businessmen in their respective cities had not kept their part of the agreement and to the businessmen, Robinson was not doing what he had promised to do. No one was happy.

In the end, though, bitterness between Robinson and at least the Minneapolis businessmen vanished. W. G. Nye of the Minneapolis Commercial Club said "we do not blame Robinson for ending his flight ... but we do blame A. B. Lambert, president of the St. Louis Aero club and Spearman Lewis, his representative, who told us . . . that all of the towns along the route had been lined up."11

On October 23 the aviator released a statement explaining that the withdrawal of financial guarantees had made it impossible for him to pay expenses much less make a profit. In a personal telegram to Tuttle, he praised Minneapolis generosity, saying "I did not expect much, still I expected to be able to pay expenses . . . . I want to thank Minneapolis for their kindness, and I will carry the [city's] name on my ship indefinitely to show my appreciation."12

The venture had fallen far short of its ambitious goal but, still, it had put Minnesota on the aviation map because of the national publicity given the flight. It had also been one of a handful of the earliest experimental airmail flights and was the first such in Minnesota. Perhaps more than anything, though, 1911 was still a tentative time for aviation, and the fact that such a feat was even tried was audacious. Getting as far as Rock Island wasn't bad.

In later years Robinson said he regretted not finishing the flight and added that "As far as records were concerned, getting there alive was a record in itself. I was lucky to get through."13


12 Here and below, see Minneapolis Journal. Oct. 23, 1911, p. 8.


Minneapolis Sunday Tribune, Oct. 8, 1961, p. 1F, 7F.

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