

Source of the Design of the Beacon Air Mail Stamp—Revisited

by Gregg A. Hopkins, Sr. (From *Mekeel's & Stamps*, January 10, 2010, with images added)

Among many awards, Gregg Hopkins' exhibit, "The Production of the U.S. Air Mail Issue of 1928—The Beacon", has received multiple National Gold Medals, a World Series of Philately Platinum Award (99 point score) and multiple Single Frame Grand Awards (the most recent at StampShow 2009 in Pittsburgh).

As a researcher and exhibitor of the United States Air Mail Issue of 1928—I always enjoy reading articles devoted to this topic—The Beacon.

I read, with interest, the recent reprint of the 1937 *Mekeel's Weekly* article by Harley G. Moorhead in *Mekeel's & Stamps* October 9, 2009 issue. It had been many years since I had first seen the article.

Moorhead was Postmaster, Omaha, Nebraska and had written other articles on the subject including one for *The Bureau Specialist*. The primary subject of the *Mekeel's* article was the photographs used to produce the Beacon stamp vignette. While these were well described, there were no actual photos included in this article for the reader to appreciate—thus prompting my elaboration.

To briefly review: the Beacon stamp, issued July 25, 1928, was produced for the new reduced five-cent air mail rate effective the following August 1st. The intent of the Post Office Department was to promote improved air mail service with a bold, bi-color stamp which would give additional publicity for the coast to coast, day and night air mail schedules. This continuous service had been inaugurated on August 1, 1924. Night flight (the primary reason for faster service) was enabled by a "highway of lights" produced by beacons on towers and electronic flashers positioned along the routes to aid in pilot navigation.

"During the spring and summer of 1923, work was begun on the lighted airway between Cheyenne, Wyoming and Chicago. The pilots needed geographic landmarks, which, in the day-time, they had in abundance. This first lighted airway was to be their ground reference benchmark by night. The segment from Cheyenne to Chicago was chosen for night flying for two reasons. First, it was the middle of three segments and would allow daylight flight on each side of the portion. More important, the pilots would be flying largely over the Midwestern plains area—the safest ground for night flying in case of emergency landings."

The construction of the beacon towers was almost identical. Each had a fifty-foot tower with continuously rotating light atop. At the base, a shed was built to house a generator and a telephone. A caretaker was assigned to maintain each station. Between Chicago and Cheyenne there were 34 of these stations (one about every 25 to 30 miles) plus five terminal landing fields. These fields had beacon towers similar to the stations except they possessed higher candlepower lights (500,000 vs 50,000

and 36 inches vs 18 inches) that could be seen for as far as 150 miles (vs 60 to 70 miles) in clear weather. (Publicity articles claimed beacon candle power of up to 5,000,000.) In addition, at approximate three mile intervals, 289 flasher units were installed. These units were powered by cylinders of acetylene gas and were set to flash once each second.

The project was so successful, the flyway, in the spring of 1925, was extended eastward from Chicago to New York. In the fall of the same year, the "highway of lights" was extended from Cheyenne to Salt Lake City. The over 2,500 mile flyway was reported to have an initial cost just under \$550,000. This was part of a million dollar congressional funding package that included other landing field improvements—primarily financed by increased air mail postal rates.

Figure 1 is of a typical beacon tower. The reverse of this Kadel & Herbert News Photo reads:

"ALL IN READINESS FOR INAUGURATION OF OVERNIGHT AIR MAIL SERVICE BETWEEN NEW YORK AND CHICAGO."

"After months of preparation Uncle Sam has lighted the way for the pilots who will fly air mail planes in the new overnight service between New York and Chicago, which will be officially inaugurated on July 1. All planes will be brightly illuminated and in addition 150 beacons of varying degrees of brilliancy will mark the route of the flyers.

"PHOTO SHOWS: -- A lone sentinel. A 5,000,000 candle power beacon deep in the forest in the Blue Ridge Mountains, on the Chicago-New York air mail route. This beacon revolves six times a minute and is visible 12 to 15 miles. A powerful red light atop the beacon warns the pilot that this is not a landing field."



Figure 1. Blue Ridge Mountain beacon on the Chicago-New York air mail route.

The design was produced almost four years prior to the production of the Beacon stamp. Under the direction of Colonel Paul Henderson, Second Assistant Postmaster General responsible for the Division of Air-Mail Service, and Carl F. Egge, General Superintendent of Air-Mail Service, the concept of having a publicity photo of a mail plane passing one of the beacon towers across the Rocky Mountains was conceived. Under their direction, a roll of film was delivered to the caretaker of the beacon located at what is referred to as Sherman Hill (Wyoming) at 8,000+ feet, it was the highest station on the transcontinental route.) The resulting photo (Figure 2) depicted only the lower portion of the tower, the shed and surroundings—the actual beacon was omitted.

Subsequently, Egge contracted commercial photographer

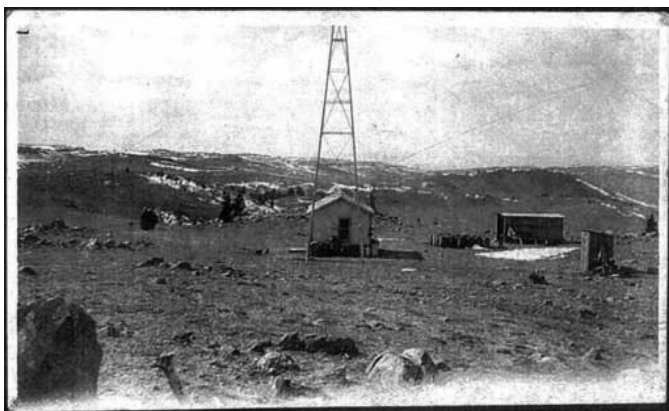


Figure 2. Beacon station at Sherman Hill (caretaker photo.)

Nathaniel L. Dewell to take additional photographs which were to include the top of the tower and of an airplane in flight. At the time, Dewell was working as a photographer for the Omaha Chamber of Commerce. During 1911-18 he was a U.S. Army photographer and still had in his possession a large, wide angle lens, military aerial camera. The subject for the Dewell photographs was the beacon tower located west of Omaha at Wann, Nebraska. At this location Dewell took several photographs. Dewell had a copy of the Sherman Hill photo (as well as the

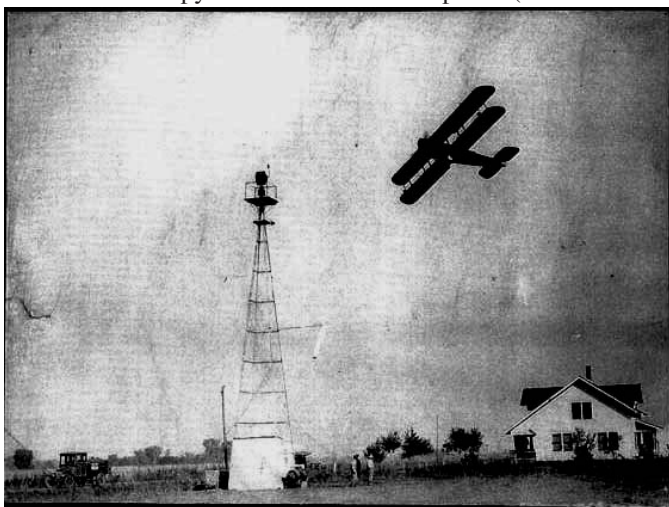


Figure 3. Wann, Nebraska (Dewell photo)—tower and beacon. (The background includes the residence of the local postmaster.)



Figure 4. Wann, Nebraska (Dewell photo)—mail plane in flight. (Note object above lamp housing is a red light indicating no landing strip or conditions not adequate for landing.)

negative) which he used to match the tower angle in the Wann photos. The Air Mail Service supplied a mail plane and pilot to fly by the tower for Dewell to complete the photo.

It is of interest to note the plane in the photograph was a DeHavilland DH-4 (as reported by the Nebraska Historical Society.) In 1925, well before the stamp was issued, these were

replaced by the Boeing Model 40. These planes were retrofitted with night-flying equipment including: running lights, landing lights and two parachute flares that could light an area for emergency night landings. Seventeen planes were so outfitted and used only on the night-flying leg of the schedule.

From the photos taken, Dewell selected the two which would best enhance the Sherman Hill photo (Figures 3 and 4). Dewell made a composite photo by positioning one on top the



Figure 5. A preliminary composite of the three final beacon photos.

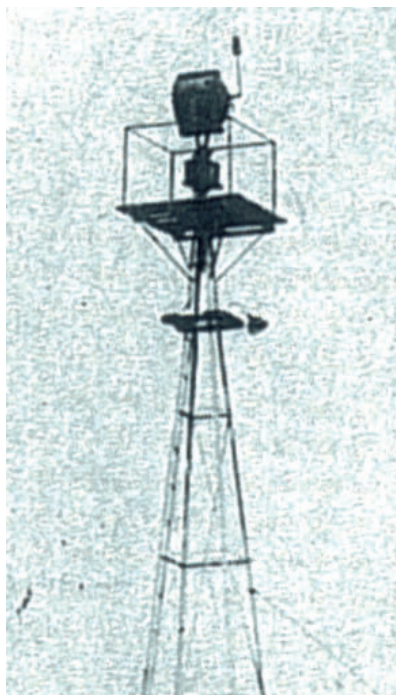


Figure 9. Aviation Magazine cover with final Dewell composite photo.



Figures 7 and 8. Top, partial Wann photo used for top of composite; bottom, partial Sherman Hill photo used for bottom of composite.

other (Figure 5, page 17) which led to the final composite (Figure 9). This created an almost seamless image of a complete tower. Under magnification, comparing the differences in structure of the Sherman Hill and Wann towers, one can determine the point of splice for the final design. This occurs at the fourth (up from the bottom) horizontal support. (Figures 7 and 8. [There is no Figure 6. JFD.]

The Dewell photo was used for publicity, first appearing on the cover of the December 22, 1924 issue of *Aviation* (Figure 9, page 18), an American aeronautical weekly magazine. The beacon received other publicity prior to the stamp being issued including the 1925 Supplement to the U.S. Official Postal Guide and a 1925

actual Sherman Hill photo.) It is interesting that the use of color was possibly considered by the photographer. (The first official color rendering for the stamp was made by Meissner.)

Prior to the submission of the photograph to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, the Post Office department added clouds to the photo. (It is reported that Dewell accomplished this with air-brushing.) Designer Alvin Meissner departed from the standard

GM Delco print ad (Figure 10).

According to Moorhead the Dewell composite photograph was used “very extensively” in promoting air mail, at first by the Post Office Department, and later by Boeing Air Transport after it had taken over the western part of the route in 1927.

There were other photos in private hands. Moorhead reported he had a set in his possession developed from the original negatives. Also, Phillip Silver wrote of a contact with Dewell’s grandson (Benjamin L. Dewell) in which he reported he had in his possession “a painted photograph from which the 1928 five cent air mail stamp entitled, “Beacon on Rocky Mountains” was made. This photograph which was subsequently painted over to give it color for the stamp, was taken on Sherman Hill by my grandfather, Nathaniel L. Dewell.” (Dewell is credited with the Wann photos not the

FACTS ABOUT A FAMOUS FAMILY



One of the U. S. air mail beacons which are lighted from power generated by Delco-Light electric plants.

Lighting the way of the mail planes

General Motors has contributed to the safety and surety of the air mail.

Delco-Light electric plants, a General Motors product, furnish the current for 50 of the 54 beacons which light the night route of the mail planes from Cleveland, Ohio, to Rock Springs, Wyoming—a distance of nearly 1,500 miles.

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Figure 10. GM Delco Plants Light the Night for U.S. Air Mail



Figure 11. Ink-wash drawing by Alvin Meissner based on the photographic model produced by Dewell. Approved June 6, 1928 by Harry S. New, PMG and initialed by Michael Eidsness, Supt. Department of Stamps, POD. Courtesy Kent Kobersteen. [See our front cover for a color reproduction of this drawing. JFD.]

photographic method to create a model. He created a “stamp-size two color painting” (Figure 11) in which he altered the biplane in the photograph to a faster looking monoplane. (The windsock below the beacon platform was also “lost” in the final rendering.) This “ink-wash” drawing (proposing the largest U.S. stamp ever to be issued) was submitted and approved June 6, 1928. After P.O.D. approval, Louis S. Schofield engraved the blue vignette die Number 769 and on June 14, 1928 the first trial impressions were made by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The following day, die proofs were pulled and forwarded to



Figure 12. Signed die proof of the final engraving.

the Postmaster General Harry S. New for approval (Figure 12).

While the stamp design is credited to Meissner, it follows a format set by C. Aubrey Huston (with whom Meissner was previously an assistant.) The frame is symmetrical, with the denomination circled in both bottom corners. The lettering is in banknote Roman typeface that Huston often used. Acanthus leaves (one of Huston’s favorite decorations) were positioned at each side of the frame. A *Mekeel’s* writer named Sevard, mocked the large acanthus leaves comparing them to “boxing gloves.” They were jokingly referred to as Dempsey’s mitts—“As a stamp, it is a knock-out.”

The Post Office Department’s official description of the Beacon stamp design reads, “the beacon light on Sherman Hill, in the Rocky Mountains, with a mail plane in flight...” The official description by the B.E.P. reads, “In center is a beacon light on Sherman Hill, in the Rocky Mountains...” Both descriptions are conceptually correct but technically inaccurate—as we know the actual beacon portion of the design was from a tower located in Wann, Nebraska.

A span of over a year and one-half saw just under 107 million copies printed of the Beacon stamp—well more than twice any previous air mail issue. This became one of the most popular, the most researched and the most exhibited U.S. Air Mail issues of all time.

In 1953 the Omaha Philatelic Society, in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beacon stamp, reproduced the Dewell composite photograph for the subject of their exhibition covers. Dewell was on hand to autograph some of these covers which were a tribute to his photographic talents (Figure 13).

Additional Credits:



Figure 13. Omaha Philatelic Exhibition cover with composite photo signed by Nathaniel L. Dewell.

- Bize, David, *Beacon Specialist*, Sun City West, Ariz.;
- Boughner, Fred, “Air Mail Antics”, Amos Press;
- Bureau of Engraving & Printing, Washington, D.C.;
- Griffith, Gary, *United States Stamps 1927-32*, Linn’s Stamp News;
- Goodkind, Henry, “The 5¢ Beacon Air mail Stamp of 1928”, *Collectors Club Handbook*;
- Kobersteen, Kent, *Beacon Specialist*, Washington, D.C.;
- National Postal Museum, Washington, D.C.

Some Additional Images

In order to enhance this Stamp News Online presentation, I have added these supplementary images to the original Mekeel's & STAMPS article. JFD.

POST OFFICE - NEW YORK, N. Y. JUL 1924 CLASSIFICATION SECTION

Transit mail forwarded to destination by Railway Mail Service will be rated to the point carried by Air Mail. No additional postage for transportation beyond the point to which mail is carried by the Air Mail Service will be required - the zone rate will deliver to addressee.

RATES OF POSTAGE

BETWEEN	New York	Washington	Chicago	St. Louis	St. Paul	Denver	San Francisco
New York	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Washington	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Chicago	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
St. Louis	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
St. Paul	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Denver	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
San Francisco	10	10	10	10	10	10	10

SUMMER SCHEDULE

WEST	WEST	EAST	EAST
San Francisco	7:00 AM	Chicago	7:00 AM
Chicago	7:00 AM	St. Louis	7:00 AM
St. Louis	7:00 AM	St. Paul	7:00 AM
St. Paul	7:00 AM	Denver	7:00 AM
Denver	7:00 AM	San Francisco	7:00 AM

At such cities as show an arrival late in the day by the Air Mail Schedule the use of special delivery stamps in addition to the zone postage will insure delivery on the date of receipt.

Postage eight cents on ounce, or fraction thereof, for each zone, or part of zone, in which mail is carried by plane. Transit mail forwarded to destination by Railway Mail Service will be rated to point carried by Air Mail Service.

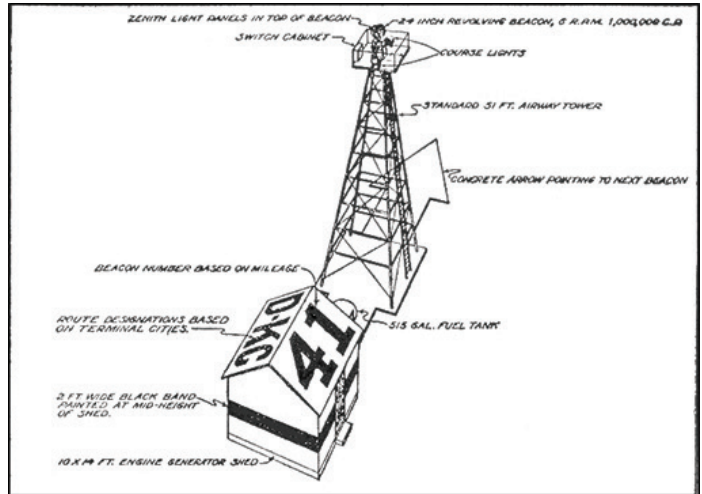
OFFICES NOT LISTED ON THE AIR MAIL ROUTE MAY DISPATCH BY RAIL TO CONTACT THEREWITH. FOR EXAMPLE: PHOENIX MAY DISPATCH TO LOS ANGELES BY RAIL TO NEW YORK OR CLEVELAND, THENCE BY AIR TO SAN FRANCISCO THENCE BY RAIL TO DENVER. DENVER MAY DISPATCH TO LOS ANGELES OR PHOENIX BY RAIL FROM DENVER TO CHICAGO, BY AIR TO SAN FRANCISCO OR NEW YORK, BY TRAIN SAN FRANCISCO TO LOS ANGELES, OR NEW YORK TO PHOENIX.

POST OFFICE - NEW YORK, N. Y. JUL 1924 CLASSIFICATION SECTION

From Wikipedia, a 1924 U.S. Air Mail route



From Wikipedia, the remnants of Transcontinental Air Mail Route Beacon 37A, which was located atop a bluff in St. George, Utah. With concrete arrows indicating the direction to the next beacon, a rotating light tower, and a shed that usually held a generator and fuel tanks, these beacons were once situated every 10 miles on air routes across the United States beginning around 1923.



From Wikipedia, a light, tower, shed, and concrete arrow



Beacon 61B on a modern display tower, originally installed on route CAM-8 near Castle Rock, Wash.



From the National Postal Museum website, post-almuseum.si.edu, a large field flood light at the Omaha, Nebraska airmail field.



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