



Kansas State University Libraries
New Prairie Press

Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2022 - Weather in the Flint Hills

Remembering Knute Rockne and His Fatal Flight in the Flint Hills

Bobbie Anthon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh>

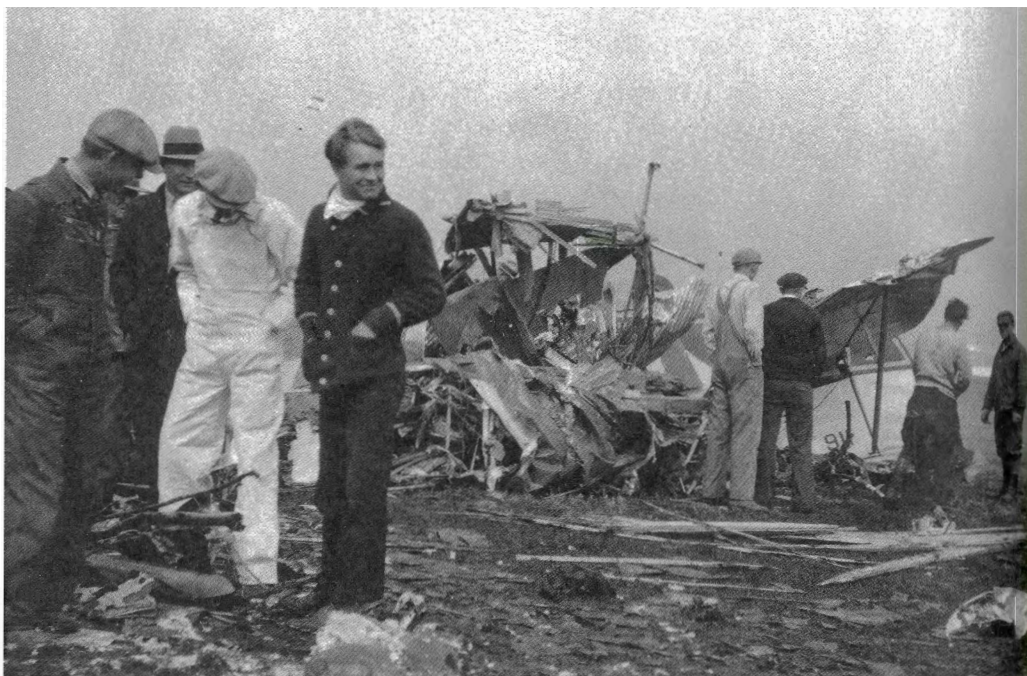
Recommended Citation

Anthon, Bobbie (2022). "Remembering Knute Rockne and His Fatal Flight in the Flint Hills," Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal.

To order hard copies of the Field Journals, go to shop.symphonyintheflinthills.org.

The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.



Knute Rockne Airplane Crash Wreckage
 kansasmemory.org, Kansas State Historical Society

REMEMBERING KNUTE ROCKNE AND HIS FATAL FLIGHT IN THE FLINT HILLS

It was a cold and drizzly March morning in 1931 when TWA* Flight 599 departed from Kansas City, headed for Wichita.

The Fokker F-10 lifted off around 9:15 with Robert Fry in the pilot's seat and Jesse Mathias as co-pilot. In the days before the security of seatbelts, the plane's six passengers sat in wicker chairs with leather cushions. The dark red and silver tri-motor soon rose above the fog and headed south.

As the flight neared the Flint Hills, the weather worsened. At 9:55, the Wichita tower contacted the flight. Mathias replied, "I can't talk now — too busy."

The Wichita control tower asked, "What are you going to do?" Mathias replied, "I don't know."

At 10:22, Mathias radioed their position. They were on course, 35 miles north of Cassoday, just south of Emporia. "The weather here is getting tough," he told them. "We've been forced too low by clouds. We're going to turn around and go back to Kansas City."

The pilot banked the tri-motor to the right while navigating the thick clouds, sleet and snow. Station operator O'Reilly in Wichita reported that local weather was satisfactory. Mathias said, "We've headed back, but it's getting tighter. Think we'll come on to Wichita. It looks pretty bad."

*At the time of the crash, the airline's name was Transcontinental and Western Air Inc. The airline officially became Trans World Airlines in 1950.

O'Reilly answered, "Do you think you'll make it? Can you get through?"

Mathias replied finally, "Don't know yet, don't know yet."

The fog was thick and low when the tri-motor passed over the Baker family farm near Bazaar in Chase County. The Bakers heard the plane as it circled, throttled back and then crashed into the ground. C.H. McCracken watched the plane's last moments. "A few seconds after the plane appeared through the clouds, a wing came into view. It floated down and landed almost one-half mile east." The plane's three motors dug deep into the ground. Debris was strewn across the pasture.

All eight on board were killed.

As recovery efforts began, the Associated Press reported that Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne may have been a passenger on the flight. Football equipment among the debris confirmed that conclusion.

Jesse Harper lived about an hour away from the crash site. Harper had been Rockne's football coach at Notre Dame. He arrived to help identify the body of his friend and former player.

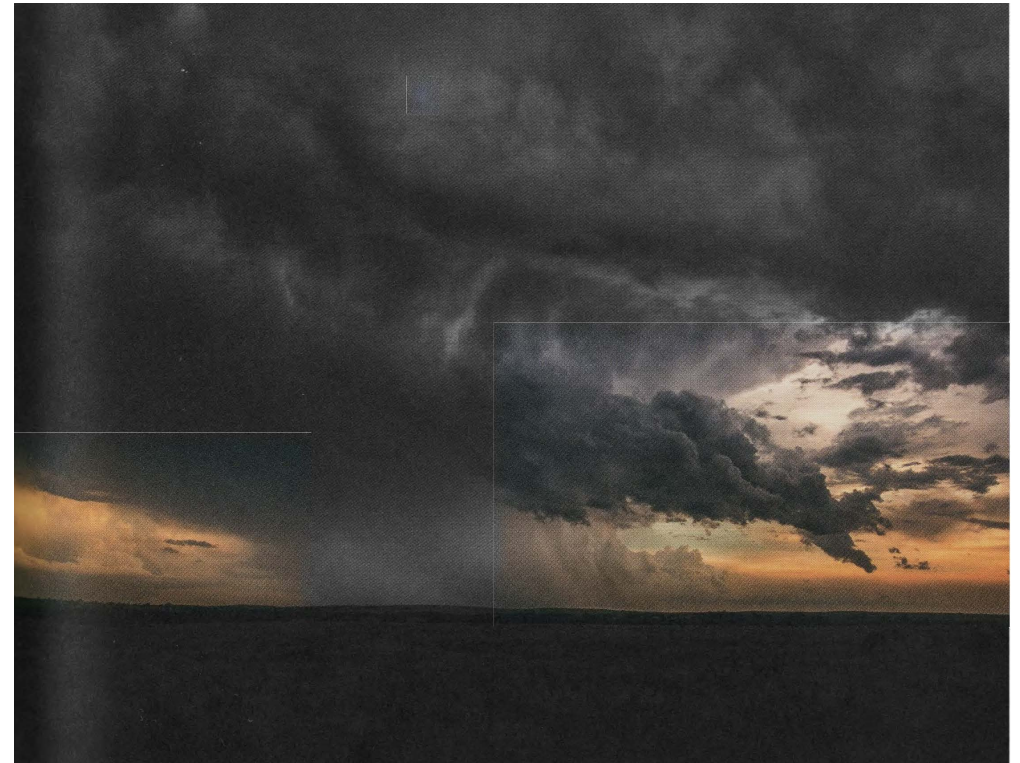
Investigators finally concluded that wind and weather were factors in the crash. But more importantly, moisture had seeped into the airplane's wood laminate over time. This caused the wing joint to weaken. During the flight's

changes in altitude, the wing began wagging up and down, folded back and tore itself free from the body. The plane had rolled end over end before plunging into the ground.

After the investigation, numerous changes were made in the airline industry. Wooden airplanes were replaced with all-metal aircraft; new investigation procedures brought independent oversight, more transparency and added safety regulations. Increased public confidence in air travel led to huge growth in the industry and made way for the golden age of flight.

The crash site near Bazaar in Chase County is marked with a granite memorial, erected on private land in 1935. A Kansas Historical Marker was placed along U.S. Highway 50 to honor Rockne and the other victims. A marker at the Matfield Green service area on the Kansas Turnpike provides travelers with more details about TWA Flight 599.

Excerpted with minor edits from
"Remembering Knute Rockne and His
Fatal Flight in the Flint Hills ... 88 Years
Ago," March 22, 2019. Reprinted with
permission from Kansas Public Radio and the
author, Bobbie Athon.



Pottawatomie County Rain Storm
Dave Leiker