

Olympic Gold Medalist Fred Kelly was early airline pilot in Idaho aviation: PART I

By SYD ALBRIGHT/Special to The Press | Posted: Sunday, April 17, 2016 12:00 am



Hist1

DELTA AIRLINES MUSEUM Fred W. Kelly (1881-1974), Western Airlines' first pilot, often flew the Utah-Idaho-Montana route.

He won gold at the 1912 Olympics, buzzed President Wilson's ship, barn-stormed Cuba in an open-cockpit Jenny, and then became a pioneer airline pilot who helped bring commercial aviation to Idaho. But all the glory and accomplishments of an adventurous life couldn't stop the dark clouds of tragedy.

For 20 years, no one knew where Fred Warren Kelly was until I found him at Shady Acres trailer park in Long Beach, Calif., driving an old Chevy and living on \$137 a month from Social Security. He'd retired as chief pilot from Western Airlines before they had any retirement plans. He joined the company in December 1925 as the first pilot hired as they were getting started.

Fred was born in 1891 in Beaumont, Calif., the son of a rancher. He had four sisters and a brother. He attended USC and excelled in track and football. The great SC Coach Dean Cromwell called him "the greatest athlete I've ever coached." He was good enough to win a berth on the U.S. Olympic team and won the gold medal in the 110-meter high hurdles. His time was 15.1 seconds. (World record today is 12.80 seconds.)

Fred had some illustrious teammates — Jim Thorpe, the Sauk Indian from Oklahoma, Avery Brundage, who won both the pentathlon and decathlon and was later president of the International Olympic Committee; and swimmer Duke Kahanamoku of Hawaii, father of surfing — who always preferred the long wooden surfboard.

At a track meet in France after the Olympics, Kelly lost a race to Thorpe because he was distracted by a plane flying overhead. It was the first time he'd seen an airplane and from then on he wanted to be an aviator. The two raced several times more but Kelly never lost to him again.

In 1916, he left SC and joined the Aviation Section of the Army Signal Corps and learned to fly. He was supposed to go to France to fight but never made it. The war ended and he was stationed on Long Island, New York.

Fred had a keen sense of humor and was ever the prankster. Learning that President Wilson was steaming down the Hudson River on his way to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Fred and a pal flew a Jenny low over the ship "to say goodbye to the President."

The ship was belching black smoke from the funnel. Fred flew right through it. "I almost hit the antenna wires between the masts," he said. "I heard indirectly that Mrs. Wilson got scared so they radioed back 'to give this guy the works!'" He was grounded for two weeks.

Leaving the army, Fred and his friend Stu Jolly went barnstorming in Cuba with two Jennys, charging \$50 a ride. One crash landing and broken arm later ended Fred's barnstorming career, but before he left Cuba he flew from Havana to Santiago — 472 miles southeast near Guantanamo. It was the first flight in history between the two cities and later Fred received a medal for it.

In 1921 during Prohibition, he returned to the U.S., smuggling in a case of rum. He gave it all away to friends — never touching a drop himself.

For the next few years, Kelly was busy with several jobs — including helping with the 1924 Olympics, and being assistant coach to Dean Cromwell at USC.

After World War I, the U.S. Army and Post Office were flying the mail but failed miserably. They were losing too many pilots and planes. With the Kelly Act of 1925, flying the mail was put up for civilian bids. Also that year, Fred married Marie McDonald of Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, Western Air Express was being organized in L.A. Fred was hired as its first pilot by Corliss C. Moseley, the company's vice president of operations, and Fred's former football teammate at USC. Kelly helped select the best aircraft for the job — the canvas-covered Douglas M-2 biplanes, powered by a single water-cooled Liberty engine.

The pilot sat in the rear open cockpit while the passenger and mail bags shared the front seat.

WAE won the Los Angeles-Las Vegas-Salt Lake City route, and converted an old movie studio into a hangar in today's City of Commerce. The runway was a strip of land they called Vail Field.

The first airmail service in Idaho was Varney Air Lines established by Walter T. Varney with headquarters in Boise. He won airmail route Cam-5 between Pasco, Wash., and Elko, Nev., with a stop in Boise.

On April 6, 1926, pilot Leon C. Cuddeback was cheered into the sky by 4,000 to 6,000 spectators in Pasco witnessing the first eastbound flight. He was flying an open cockpit three-seat biplane powered by a single Curtiss OX-5 engine. He was carrying 207 pounds of mail.

The first westbound flight didn't go so well. The pilot was Franklin Rose who was blown 75 miles off course because of a storm between Elko and Boise. He had to make a forced landing, and then walked for two days carrying 98 pounds of mail before he found a farmer with a phone and a horse.

On April 17, 1926 — 11 days after Varney's first flight — Fred Kelly watched his fellow pilot Maury Graham don his heavy leather flight suit, boots and gloves, carefully adjusting the leather helmet and goggles. Then he climbed into the cockpit of the M-2 at Vail Field. Having won the toss of a coin, Maury would fly the inaugural roundtrip mail flight to Salt Lake. Fred would have his turn in a couple of days.

Western started with four pilots — Fred Kelly, Maury Graham, Jimmy James and Al DeGarmo. They called them "The Four Horsemen." Flying the mail in those rickety biplanes was dangerous duty, and mishaps happened often. Most of the time it was minor — such as forced landings due to adverse weather or engine troubles. But for Maury Graham, it was major.

On Jan. 10, 1930, Maury kissed his wife Alice goodbye in L.A. and headed for Vail to fly mail and a million dollars worth of negotiable securities to Salt Lake City. He never arrived.

Fruitlessly they searched for him. It wasn't until June that some kids found the crumpled wreck of the plane in the Kanarra Mountains south of Cedar City. The unopened mail bags were there — but no Maury. The boys raced back to town and returned with a search party.

They didn't find his body until the following month. Someone noticed some wheat strangely growing on the other side of a log. To help quit smoking, Maury used to chew on raw wheat. The wheat had grown right out of his pocket.

Fred Kelly had his share of flying problems too — one of them a memorable crash landing in Las Vegas. It was June 6, 1928, and Fred was flying a single-engine Lockheed Air Express to Salt Lake with two passengers inside. One was Will Rogers who was on his way to the Republican National Convention in Kansas City.

"It was 110 degrees in Las Vegas that morning," Kelly said. "There was a concrete 'T' in the center of the landing strip to show the direction to land. The wind had blown the sand away and left the T exposed about three inches.

"When I came in for a landing, I had pretty good speed. I hit the T with the right wheel and broke the aluminum casting. The axle hit the ground and flipped the plane over. On the way over, I thought it would hang, and then fall back — but it didn't.

"It fell gently on its back. The tail kept my head about two feet off the ground." Both men were hanging upside down — held only by their seat belts.

That was not the end of Rogers' troubles that day: In Salt Lake City, he boarded a Boeing Air Transport plane for the rest of a flight to Chicago when almost the same accident happened again on a landing in Omaha.

Rogers later wrote in his column, "It wouldn't have happened if I'd been going to the Democratic Convention!"

It was a rocky start for airline travel. END OF PART I

Fred Kelly hit with tragedy, then glory once again late in life: Part II

By SYD ALBRIGHT/History Corner | Posted: Sunday, April 24, 2016 1:00 am

Starting an airline was no easy matter. There was little past experience to learn from and they were dealing with new technology — the "airplane" — that was very unreliable and even dangerous. But there's always been something about aviation that captures the heart of adventurous people. Fred Warren Kelly was one of them.

After winning the 110-meter high hurdles at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics, followed by a track meet where the distraction of seeing his first airplane cost him the race against Jim Thorpe, Fred was hooked.

But it wasn't just pilots. Mechanics and other ground personnel also fell in love with the flying business. To them it wasn't just a job — it was a calling. They put their hearts and souls into building a huge new industry. The world would never be the same — and America led the charge.

Flying in the early days was a freewheeling enterprise. Western's first route between L.A. and Salt Lake City with a stop in Vegas generally followed the snaking Union Pacific railroad tracks. "The gleams of the rails were the early day radio beams that guided the flyers," Fred said. "In bad weather, the pilots even made it a strict rule to follow the right-hand side of the track to avoid collisions with the opposite bound airplane.

"Arrangements were made with ranchers, railroad clerks and others to phone in weather information. The Union Pacific Railroad cooperatively offered the use of its phone boxes along the track."

Landing in the desert to use those phones was no big deal. On one flight, Kelly and another pilot spotted a shepherd with his flock in a field near Milford, Utah. "I could see his stove burning," Fred continued, "and I knew those guys were famous for their sourdough biscuits, so we just set down in the field and had lunch with him."

On another occasion, his passenger was Bebe Daniels — a top movie star of those times. During the flight, he saw Jimmy James flying in the opposite direction, and he knew that Jimmy always wanted to meet Bebe, so he signaled for them to land.

They did, and out in the open desert the two pilots and Bebe had a nice half-hour chat, jumped back into their planes and took off in opposite directions — both arriving a half-hour late.

Both pilots reported "headwinds!"

During those early open-cockpit years, Western "only" had 13 forced landings due to mechanical problems — but "a lot more" due to weather. "We couldn't get any medals for forced landings," Fred said, "because the mechanics were too good." — They even worked on the Spirit of St. Louis when Charles Lindbergh visited Western's home base Vail Field in 1927, while on an aviation publicity tour of America after his historic solo flight across the Atlantic.

Lindy also visited Boise.

Despite the mishaps, Western was doing well and turning a profit. By 1930, they were flying bigger and better planes, though on some routes they were still flying mail in open-cockpit planes — and carrying the occasional brave passenger.

But for the L.A. to San Francisco route, they introduced the big canvas-covered Fokker F-32 — a spectacular new passenger aircraft that carried 32 passengers. It was the most luxurious plane in the world at that time — but it didn't last.

Four engines were mounted under the wing — two on each side, aligned front and back in single pods. The engines turned out to be under-powered and the front engines overheated the back ones. The F-32 was a colossal failure and scrapped after only two years. One of the planes ended up as a gas station on Wilshire Boulevard in L.A.

The F-32 was quickly followed by the all-metal Boeing 247D 10-passenger aircraft. Western's open-cockpit days were over.

As the Great Depression grew worse, Western almost went under. Pressure from the U.S. Post Office forced them to merge with Transcontinental Air Transport to form Transcontinental and Western Air (TWA). It was an unholy alliance and soon fell apart. TWA continued flying — taking most of Western best routes — leaving Western with only its original L.A. to Salt Lake run plus San Diego.

Many Western employees joined TWA — but not Fred Kelly. He wasn't about to leave the company he helped put on the map.

Fred was a top-notch pilot and an excellent instructor and they made him chief pilot. He loved night flying and instrument flying — which at that time was still rudimentary. When certain instrument flying techniques hadn't been devised yet, he devised them — including the “race track” holding pattern. (Pilots will know what that is.)

Fred admitted that he didn't know if he was first with that idea or not, but “I never heard of it before,” he said.

He took his job seriously but remained ever the prankster. Once he led a group of Salt Lake pilots on a familiarization trip to Ketchum in Sun Valley that turned out to be a romp. “I was sitting in the back with some of the boys and we were razzing the boys in the cockpit. I guess they got a little tired of it, so they locked the cockpit door.”

The pilots in the cabin pulled the pins out of the door hinges and then told them on the intercom that there was a problem in the back. As soon as they came to check it out, the door fell off the hinges. “We really gave them a horselaugh!”

Throughout the '30s, the company continued to grow their route system by acquiring other small carriers. One of them was National Parks Airways in 1937, which extended Western's Salt Lake service north to Great Falls, with stops at Pocatello, Idaho Falls, Butte and Helena.

NPA originally flew single-engine Fokker Super Universal aircraft that carried six passengers in a cabin while the pilot sat in an open cockpit. Later, they switched to 247s — which joined Western fleet of newer model 247Ds, Douglas DC-2s and DC-3s after the buyout.

The merger virtually doubled Western's route system, and linked Idaho and Montana with single-carrier service to Los Angeles and other major cities, making commercial aviation an everyday part of life in the region.

When World War II broke out, Western was assigned to fly men and material to Alaska, using the company's DC-3s — designated C-47s by the Army Air Corps. It was called “Operation Sourdough,” and Fred was in charge. It was tough duty.

“Airports were still dirt strips,” he said. “There were no radio navigation facilities. Sleeping bags aboard the planes gave pilots slim hope of catching up on sleep... Gasoline hoses snapped like glass. Altimeters would be off a thousand feet either way.” The cold would cause the compass fluid to seal the instruments “as though encased in a Jell-O pudding.”

After the war, Fred suffered a slight heart pain. He flew for a short while, and then asked to be grounded. “I didn’t want to fly with a heart condition,” he said. “Doctors couldn’t find anything wrong with me but my heart still hurt.” He was assigned public relations duty, talking before civic groups and even appearing on the Ed Sullivan Show.

In 1950, he took a leave of absence and tried several other jobs but returned to Western the following year and was assigned security work. Becoming increasingly discouraged, Fred submitted his resignation only to face harder times ahead:

His only son Fred Jr. was killed in a car accident, then his wife Marie died of smoke inhalation when their home in Glendale, Calif., caught fire. And his dog was hit by a car. He retired before airlines offered pensions and Fred had to sell his house and ended up living in Shady Acres Trailer Park in Long Beach, Calif., and sold shoes, sox and ladies hosiery for a living.

In 1964, his old company found him and invited him to come and visit. He was 74 and still standing erect and proud. There was a warm twinkle in his eye and boyish, almost shy smile lighting up his face when he talked about the old days.

Western gave him a modest pension and for two years he toured America from Washington, D.C., to Hawaii on a paid publicity assignment. In Honolulu, he met Nadine, widow of his Olympics teammate Duke Kahanamoku.

Fred Kelly died in Applegate, Ore., near his old flying buddy Al DeGarmo in Florence on May 7, 1974. He was 82. His funeral was held at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, Calif., and the Church of the Wee Heather was packed with airline people.

Fred was very proud when his biography appeared in two parts in the Journal of the American Aviation Historical Society. “When you going to write Part Three?” he’d ask with a twinkle in his eye.

Part Three is a never-ending story written around the world by those in aviation who follow in the footsteps of flyers like Fred Kelly and the thousands of other early birds who led the way.

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