



# Offbeat Oregon History: 1933 a rough year for aviators



PHOTO COURTESY FINN J.D. JOHN

A Ford Trimotor parked on an airfield at Langley Research Center in 1934. (Image: NASA)

By Finn JD John  
For The Sentinel

Commercial air travel has become so safe and so banal — especially for the poor fish packed into the “coach” seating — that it’s sometimes easy to forget what a new experience flying is, historically speaking.

That was not the case in the year 1933, though. That was the year that saw Oregon’s first two fatal commercial passenger airplane crashes: one in January, and another in November.

There was no National Transportation Safety Board in 1933, and no Federal Aviation Administration. So the stories of these early plane crashes have to be taken directly from newspaper reports. Luckily, they’re fairly complete.

Ford Tri-Motor crash, Eugene

In January 1933, the closest thing to an “airliner” one could step aboard was the Ford Tri-motor, a large spindly-looking machine that looked a bit like a giant cricket built out of roofing tin. It had been introduced in 1926 and had an enviable reputation for ruggedness and dependability; the first overflight of the South Pole was done in a Tri-motor with skis in place of landing gear.

One great advantage of the Tri-motor was that, with three engines pulling it through the air, there were only one or two possible circumstances in which losing an engine would cause it to crash. But unfortunately, as they prepared their big airplane for takeoff on the afternoon of Jan. 24, United Air Lines pilot Harold Adams, copilot Kenneth Houseolder, and stewardess Cornelia Pederman were about to find out the hard way what one of

those circumstances was.

The three of them had taken off from Swan Island Airfield in Portland at 10:15 a.m. that morning on a regularly scheduled flight southward — probably to Medford, although the newspapers don’t specify. The weather was iffy, with a very low cloud cover, and all the passengers who had been booked for the flight had had their tickets canceled; but there was still the mail to deliver, so the flight went on as scheduled.

But by the time the airplane got to Eugene, the ceiling had dropped so low that Adams wasn’t willing to risk going farther south. So he dropped into the Eugene airport and had the mail transferred to a southbound train. Then he taxied the heavy airplane back to the runway, fed the engines fuel, and started the takeoff run.

And it appears the right-hand engine failed just as the plane was lifting off the runway. The big craft veered sharply, hit a runway light, wobbled slowly into the air — and was swatted out of the sky by a telegraph pole. It pancaked down onto a vacant house, which was knocked six feet off its foundation and collapsed under the impact.

This probably saved stewardess Pederman’s life; she survived the crash with just a broken ankle. Adams and Houseolder weren’t so lucky. Both were rushed to the hospital, but soon died of their injuries.

In Adams, particularly, Oregon aviation lost a real treasure. A native of Myrtle Point, Adams was an old Army pilot, having learned to fly in France in 1918; after the war, he made a living for a time as one of those classic “Barnstormer” stunt flyers, making his way from town to town

with his trusty plane (probably a Curtiss JN-4) and performing aerobatics, wing-walking stunts, and similar daredevilries. For a time he ran a flying school in Roseburg. He was hired by United Air Lines in 1931, and quickly forged a reputation as one of the operation’s most careful and trustworthy pilots. Copilot Houseolder, a 25-year-old Eugene native, doubtless considered himself lucky to be flying with him.

Boeing 247 crash, Portland

Just 10 months later, the airline business had changed a great deal. For one thing, the old, slow Ford Trimotors had been replaced at United Airlines by a new generation of sleek, silver aircraft that actually looked like airliners, albeit tiny ones. The first of these was built by United Air Lines’ sister company, Boeing, up in Seattle; it was called the Boeing 247, and it had two engines and carried up to 10 passengers at speeds of 200 miles an hour, which was faster than top-line fighter planes could go.

It was also capable of instrument flight and night flight. Both of these were involved in what happened shortly after takeoff at 10:50 p.m. on the cold, foggy night of Nov. 9.

The airplane was going to The Dalles, lined up on the runway to take off into the teeth of the usual wintertime wind that comes up from the south. But as it reached the midpoint, just as the tail wheel lifted off the turf, the big bird did a partial ground-loop.

A ground-loop is a hazard that many tail-dragging airplanes are particularly vulnerable to; it’s the same dynamic that makes badly loaded trailers start pitching and swaying from side to side. It happens because the center of gravity is behind the wheels, and if that center of gravity happens to move far enough to one side of the wheels it tries to pass them, spinning the aircraft around. This can cause serious damage.

In this case, though, pilot Al Davis apparently caught it in time, swinging the tail of the plane safely back behind the wheels and continuing the takeoff run. But the maneuver caused the plane to swerve off the edge of the runway. It shot across another runway, through a parking lot and out over the Willamette River, which it very nearly fell into; but instead, the engines roaring at full power, it slowly climbed off the river and gained altitude.

And this is the point at which pilot Al Davis, a Seattle native, made his real mistake. He apparently did not look at the compass. Assuming that the rough take-off had been more or less a normal one (remember, this was in heavy fog) he carried on climbing to altitude, assuming he was flying south, actually flying due west.

The first sign of trouble came when it was too late to do anything. Copilot H.B. Woodworth, an Oakland native, saw treetops looming out of the fog.

“Look out for the trees!” he shouted.

Pilot Davis, who was focusing on the instruments, looked up, tried to bank away, saw it was no use, and shouted, “Cut!” — meaning to cut

power to the engines so that in the crash they would not ignite the fuel tanks.

The plane hit the hillside before Woodworth could reach the switch.

It must have been an unusually fortunate strike, because the majority of people on the airplane survived. The cockpit was demolished, and Davis was instantly killed; but somehow Woodworth was thrown clear through a hole torn in the hull, injuring him but saving his life in the process.

Back in the passenger cabin, the three passengers on the left-hand side were in the most trouble, as the wing had hit a tree and come through the side of the plane. Among these three was Robert C. Coffey, M.D., director of the Coffey Clinic in Portland and a world-famous cancer specialist, who was apparently killed instantly; his death was reported in newspapers nationwide and in Time Magazine. Two other passengers on the left side of the plane also died — either from the impact, or from the fire that quickly broke out.

Stewardess Libby Wurgaft quickly got the door open and started hustling the stunned survivors out before the flames could reach them. She had to go back into the burning plane four times before everyone who could be saved was out.

Then the survivors had to figure out what to do next. They had crashed in the middle of what is now Forest Park, a long way from anyone.

The survivors kindled a fire with the help of some papers one of them had in his pocket, and huddled around it while the two of them who could walk — copilot Woodworth and Medford resident Floyd Hart — stumbled off in search of help. They finally found a camp of woodcutters, who directed them to a telephone; but it wasn’t until 4 a.m. that the survivors were safely rescued.

Ironically, the medical facility to which they were taken was the Robert C. Coffey Clinic and Hospital.



The interior of a Ford Trimotor as seen from the viewpoint of a passenger.

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Subscription Mail Rates in Lane and Portions of Douglas Counties:  
Ten Weeks.....\$9.50  
One year.....\$37.65  
e-Edition year.....\$35.00

Rates in all other areas of United States: Ten Weeks \$11.70; one year, \$46.35, e-Edition \$43.00.

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Periodicals postage paid at Cottage Grove, Oregon.

Postmaster: Send address changes to P.O. Box 35, Cottage Grove, OR 97424.

### Local Mail Service:

If you don't receive your Cottage Grove Sentinel on the Wednesday of publication, please let us know.  
Call 942-3325 between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m.

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## IN BRIEF JAN. 10-JAN.16

- Cascade Christian School 5th grade students are doing a project on the state of Oregon and ask that residents send postcards, pictures, brochures, used license plates or any other informational material about the state to 601 SE 9th Ave. Puyallup, WA 98372.
- Repairs to Gateway Blvd. begin this week at the Row River intersection. For more information on daily road conditions, visit [cottage-grove.org](http://cottage-grove.org).
- The special election for Ballot Measure 101 is set for Jan. 23. Registered voters should have received their ballots in the mail. If you believe you should have received a ballot and have not, please contact the county clerk's office at (541) 682-4234.
- Team Cottage Grove will meet on Jan. 9 at 8 p.m. at the Healing Matrix.
- Buster's Main St. Cafe will have complimentary meals for veterans and active duty personnel on Jan. 11 from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.
- State Representative Cedric Hayden will speak at the next meeting of the Cottage Grove 912 Project on Monday, Jan. 15, 6:30 p.m., at Stacy's Covered Bridge Restaurant, 401 E Main. Heather Buch, candidate for Lane Co Commissioner will also speak. The meeting is open to the public.
- Volunteers are needed for United Way to provide companionship, transportation for shopping and errands, correspondence, reading and respite care to home bound, elderly clients. Training and on-going support provided. Contact Clarence at 541-517-6396 or [ctownsend@lco.org](mailto:ctownsend@lco.org).
- Each January, the one-night Point in Time Count takes place across the nation. As a volunteer, you collect the important data that provides a snapshot of the problem of homelessness. This valuable data helps policymakers target resources to the areas of the state experiencing the greatest need. For more information visit [lanecounty.org/homelesscount](http://lanecounty.org/homelesscount) or email Alexandria.Dreher@co.lane.or.us.
- The Eugene Symphony Guild's Afternoon Tea Saturday, Jan. 20 at the Eugene Country Club, 255 Country Club Drive. 1 p.m. for social and 1:30 pm for tea with petite sandwiches and desserts. \$40. Reservations by Jan. 17 to Betsy, (541) 434-9188.

Have an event, announcement or meeting? Email details to [cmay@cgsentinel.com](mailto:cmay@cgsentinel.com).

## Letters to the Editor policy

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