

Wilber Wright Along The Apache Trail

by Tom Kollenborn (c) 2000

When we think of aviation, the names of Orville and Wilbur Wright come to mind. These brothers are credited with making the first flight with a heavier-than-air machine. They accomplished this amazing feat on December 14, 1903, near Kill Devil Hill, Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

Three days later, on December 17, 1903, the Wright brothers accomplished their most successful flight of that year. Their plane flew for 59 seconds and traveled 852 feet in the air. This flight convinced the brothers they had finally solved the problem of flight.

Sixteen years later, shortly after the end of World War I, Wilbur Wright traveled around the country demonstrating the ability of the airplane. About the same time an aviation entrepreneur named Wesley Hill wanted to start an airline in Arizona.

Wesley Hill, a transportation entrepreneur who owned the Apache Trail Auto Stage Company, was interested in business opportunities associated with aviation. Hill formed the Apache Trail Aerial Transportation Company in December of 1918. He convinced men like Lt. D.S. Bushnell, retired U.S. Air Service Aeronautical Engineer and Lt. J.F. Casey, retired U.S. Air Service, to become chief pilots in his new company.

Hill and J. Robinson Hall were convinced they could operate an aerial stage between Globe and Phoenix and they convinced Arizonians to invest in aerial stage line. They planned to use a Handley-Page bomber converted to a passenger and cargo plane.

The Handley-Page was powered by two 400 hp Liberty engines. Hill and Hall were convinced they could open the skyways over Arizona. Their advertisements of the day claimed a flight from Phoenix to Los Angeles would require only three hours and a flight to Globe from Phoenix would require only an hour.

In February, 1919, Hall and Hill released stock in their company and the periodicals of February, 1919, were filled with advertisements about aerial transportation in Arizona. In the middle of that month, Hall and Hill traveled to New York to purchase the Handley-Page aircraft.

Once in New York they attended an U.S. Air Service reunion and heard a lot of praise about the safety record of the Handley-Page aircraft. Hill and Hall flew in the Handley-Page and further supported the testimony of the Air Service pilots. Hill pointed out the 12,000 pound airplane landed at 35 mph and was extremely easy to control in flight. They announced that the aircraft would be on its way West within two weeks. Hill announced the Apache Aero Line would start service on August 1, 1919, and the story appeared in the *Arizona Gazette* on April 5, 1919.

Following the history of Arizona's first aerial transportation company, I noticed in an *Arizona Gazette* article date August 2, 1919, Wesley Hill had sold his Apache Trail Stage Line to Union Auto Transportation Company for \$10,000. Hill had pioneered the Apache Trail Auto Stage Line some seven years prior, according to the *Gazette* article.

Wesley Hill and Robinson Hall worked long and tedious hours promoting their Aerial Transportation Company, but it never became a reality. They reminded anyone who would listen that a flight from Globe to Phoenix was possible in less than an hour.

The stock never sold like Hill and Hall had planned and the Aerial Transportation Company slowly faded into history. However, it might be interesting to note that on June 16, 1919, the following article appeared in the *Arizona Gazette*:



MAKES RECORD FLIGHT OVER APACHE TRAIL

"Piloted by Lieut. Wilbur Wright a Curtiss plane came Saturday from Globe, making a record flight of 100 miles in 52 minutes. Capt. F.L. Darrow was passenger. The flight was made without incident over the beautiful scenery of the mountains traversed by the Apache Trail.

Lieut. Wright made a flight up to Globe last Tuesday, accompanied by a man from the local recruiting station. During the short time spent in the mining town an intensive recruiting campaign gained nine applicants for the air service.

The landing Saturday was made in the small oval field within the race track at the fair grounds, as the larger field used by airplanes previously is under irrigation at the present."

Was this the same Wilbur Wright who tested the first lighter-than-air machine at Kitty Hawk in 1903?

