

Way We Were  
Steve Spaulding, Collections Volunteer  
Wednesday, February 25, 2015  
United in Tragedy

Friday afternoon, February 23, 1934, the Wasatch Mountains were blanketed by a heavy snowstorm and low-hanging clouds. Into these conditions, a United Air Lines transport plane with eight occupants left Salt Lake bound for Cheyenne. By that evening, it was declared missing. An extensive aerial search was conducted over the weekend. Late Sunday afternoon, the wreckage was located on the eastern slope of the Parley's Summit area. The low-wing, twin-motor aircraft had crashed two miles north of the Lincoln Highway and only a mile north of the beacon that showed airplanes their way through Parley's Canyon, the main route from the Salt Lake airfield to the east. The beacon had been invisible during the storm on Friday and they were unable to fly through the gap at Parley's Summit. The chief pilot of United Air Lines surmised that the pilot "was flying due east... trying to lift out of the storm and saw the trees looming before him. Fearing a crash, he probably tried to lift the ship too rapidly... (causing the plane to do) a chandelle (a half back turn) and nose into the ground." The plane crashed with such force to bury its nose into five feet of snow and three feet of frozen ground. According to Judge John Green, Summit County coroner and member of the initial rescue party, all five passengers and three crew had died instantly.

An ironic twist of fate is that the pilot, Lloyd Anderson, had been in a similar crash in 1933, when he mistook Rock Canyon for Provo Canyon when flying east over the Wasatch. He crash landed after almost hitting the canyon walls, but he and his co-pilot were able to walk away; sadly, his luck ran out in 1934.

Some of the first on the 1934 crash scene were Summit County locals. The search planes had drawn the attention of brothers Frank and Jim Rasmussen, who had been skiing at Ecker Hill. They located the wrecked plane, advised officials of its exact location and started extricating the victims. When news reached Park City that the plane had been located, hundreds of Parkites rushed to the scene. May Kidder, a student at Park City High School, and Katharine Maran, also of Park City, were recorded as the first ladies to reach the crash site. Eventually, crowds of people from Summit, Salt Lake and other counties made their way to view the wreck, creating a well-beaten path from the Lincoln highway along the summit to the scene.

As if the loss of eight lives in the crash was not enough, a detail emerged that enhanced the tragedy. Mary Carter, 24 years old and living in Salt Lake, was the flight's stewardess. After her death, it was disclosed that she was recently, and secretly, married to John Wheeler of Chicago. They had not announced the marriage because United Air Lines required their stewardesses be unmarried. Wheeler told friends that she had been planning to quit her job on April 1st.



Image number: 1986.14.14

Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Selma Kilby Collection

Caption: The three Rasmussen brothers, (l-r) Larry, Jim, and Frank, standing in front of their family's Well Come Inn and ready for skiing. Jim and Frank were two of the first people on the ground to locate the plane wreckage; they had been at Ecker Hill and were drawn by the search planes.

Sources:

<http://www3.gendisasters.com/utah/3771/nr.-salt-lake-city,-ut-air-liner-crashes-mountains,-feb-1934>

<http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1934/02/27/page/2/article/storm-hampers-quiz-on-deaths-of-8-in-air-crash>

<http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/COLVIN/2004-01/1075033950>