

Way We Were
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A Journey Interrupted, part two
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Welcome back to our second article on the first plane crash in Park City's history. Last week we were following the interrupted journey of a letter from a Mrs. Emma Nelson in San Diego to her husband Mr. WP Nelson in Chicago. We left off with the departure of the mail transport plane from Salt Lake City on March 11, 1929. On board were pilot R.T. Freng, passenger K.A. Kennedy, and forty-two bags of mail.

Navigating visually, Freng piloted out of the valley and up Parley's Canyon following the Denver and Rio Grande (DR&G) railroad tracks toward a scheduled refueling stop in Rawlins, Wyoming. Halfway up Parley's he encountered a fierce snowstorm. The plane was quickly overwhelmed. Realizing he could not make it to Rawlins in such weather, Freng turned south and followed the DR&G branch line to Park City.

Experiencing engine trouble and flying at treetop level, Freng circled Park City looking for a suitable landing area. The noise, low altitude and rarity of a plane attracted the attention of Parkites. Freng banked the plane west, narrowly missing Welsh, Driscoll and Buck's mercantile store at the top of Main Street (where Treasure Mountain Inn stands today).

Gazing through swirling snow Freng spotted a potential landing site: in 1929 there was an old mine road between Woodside and Norfolk avenues known as the "back road." Though Freng executed an amazing landing, the plane's fixed landing gear sank in the snow and the plane flipped over in the backyard of the Neilson home at 441 Woodside. The fuel tank ruptured and fire ensued.

Ernest Lange witnessed the crash from his home at 307 Norfolk. He immediately called in the fire alarm. Before the fire department could respond, Percy Williams, Klyde Peterson and Jack Mitchell ran to the crash site. Joined by Lange, the four men braved the fire and storm to pull Freng and Kennedy, knocked unconscious, to safety. Miraculously neither man suffered serious injuries. They were taken to Miners Hospital where Freng was treated for cuts and bruises and Kennedy for a broken foot.

Thirty-six mail sacks were salvaged and taken to the main Salt Lake City post office the following evening. Some envelopes were singed and suffered water damage. Salt Lake City Postal Inspector C.F. Dutton stamped each damaged envelope acknowledging the crash. On the afternoon of Tuesday, March 12, 1929, the surviving mail and Mr. Kennedy resumed their journey to Chicago via Boeing Air Transport, without further incident.

Emma Nelson's letter to her husband was one of those salvaged. It arrived in Chicago only one day late and was none the worse for wear. Indeed, neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night – nor a plane crash – will stay the US Postal Service from delivering mail.

In November 2017, the envelope arrived back in Park City courtesy of Bill Nelson, grandson of Emma and WP. Our appreciation to Bill Nelson for sharing this connection to Park City history and the story of the envelope's interrupted journey!



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Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Himes-Buck Digital Collection

Caption: Facing inclement weather and engine trouble on March 11, 1929, pilot R.T. Freng narrowly missed hitting the top of Welsh, Driscoll, and Buck mercantile, pictured, before crash landing on an old mine road between Woodside and Norfolk avenues.