

The 1929  
Mackenzie River  
Air Mails

An Exhibition by Kevin O'Reilly

# THE 1929 MACKENZIE RIVER AIR MAILS

## Purpose

This exhibit covers the transition of the postal system in the Mackenzie Valley area of northern Alberta and western Northwest Territories (settlements along the Athabasca, Slave and Mackenzie Rivers) from winter dog sleds and summer river steamers to regular air service. This was the most significant development in communications for this large region of Canada.

## Scope and Presentation

The exhibit is divided into three periods as follows:

1. **Early Western Canada Airways Flights January-March 1929**—Incoming and outgoing philatelic mail, commercial covers.
2. **Western Canada Airways Semi-Official Sticker Service April-December 1929**—Incoming and outgoing philatelic and commercial mail.
3. **Commercial Airways Flights December 1929**—Incoming and outgoing philatelic and commercial mail.

Some material from the vestige winter and summer mail services during 1929 is also shown to illustrate the important transition that took place and the difficulty in separating out how some items were actually transported.

This exhibit is the most comprehensive and thorough coverage of this topic ever presented. Some flights are presented using philatelically inspired material if commercial mail has not been located or does not exist. Where philatelic covers are used, special attention has been paid to showing pilot-signed, rates and unusual usages.

## Philatelic Importance

The introduction and development of air mail service dramatically improved communications in this region from several weeks or months, to as little as a day or two by airplane. Although this exhibit covers a huge geographic area, the population served by the Mackenzie River air mails was very small, less than 5,000. The cost of service to such outposts was high but a vital part of the Canadian national postal system.

It is not common knowledge that special date stamps were prepared for most of the cacheted, philatelic first flight covers in Canada.

Both of the sets of circle date stamps used during the December 1929 flights are shown--those prepared and generally used only on philatelic mail and those used on regular commercial mail from the individual post offices. The registration boxes prepared for the philatelic mail on this flight are also shown.

## Condition, Rarity and Difficulty of Acquisition

The condition of mail from the Mackenzie Valley area during this period is generally good considering the tremendous distances covered, climatic extremes and difficult traveling conditions at times by river steamers, dog sleds and planes.

Souvenir mail from philatelists is common and represents a significant amount of the philatelic material available. This is not surprising given the publicity surrounding these events and the high general interest in philately during this period.

There was widespread coverage of Mackenzie River air mails starting in August 1929 by the Canada Post Office Department through the philatelic media and official notices. While philatelic mail from the Mackenzie Valley air mails reached a peak with the December 1929 first regular official air mail flights, legitimate commercial mail from government personnel, missionaries, fur traders and other residents is very scarce. Several examples of commercial covers are shown including registered mail.

The material assembled for this exhibit has been acquired over more than 30 years of active pursuit.

## Research

Putting together this story of the transition of the Mackenzie Valley postal system has taken years of original research by the exhibitor, using both primary and secondary sources. Relevant files of the Post Office Department at the Library and Archives of Canada were reviewed. Flight reports from Western Canada Airways at the Manitoba Archives were also compiled and every issue of the Edmonton Journal was reviewed for the year 1929.

## Exhibit Record

This exhibit was last shown at the 2003 Edmonton Spring National Show where it received a National Vermeil. Further research is presented here on the mail contracts during this period. Several important items were acquired over the last six years and appear in this exhibit for the first time including:

- A commercial registered cover from Fort Simpson on the first flight from there in March 1929;
- The earliest reported use of a Western Canada Airways semi-official stamp on the Mackenzie Valley route in April 1929; and
- The only reported cover carried on the Fokker Super Universal aircraft G-CASP piloted by W.J. Buchanan.