By Mark Tatge in the Denver Post, August 29, 1986

Frontier Airline's Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing Thursday closes the book on an airline that grew to become a modern-day stagecoach of the Rocky Mountain West.

The airline's birth dates back to the days when pilots used railroad tracks to navigate and flew into mountains as often as they flew over them.

Frontier's precursor — Monarch Airlines — was formed in 1946 by pilot Ray Wilson and Maj. F.W. Bonfils, nephew of the co-founder of The Denver Post and business manager of that newspaper. Bonfils and Wilson had run an Army pilot training school in Chickasha, Okia., during World War II

Known for escapades

Wilson, a superb pilot, had long been known for his escapades. He use to fly charter flights for The Post, and he piloted the popular "Christmas Cross," a battery-operated, 20-by30-foot neon cross attached under the plane he flew through Denver every Christmas Eve.

Wilson dreamed of establishing scheduled air service throughout the rugged Rocky Mountains. But it wasn't until Wilson and Bonfils, whom Wilson taught to fly, became partners after the war that Wilson's dream became a reality.

Wilson was granted permission by the Civil Aeronautics Board in 1946 to begin flights from Denver to Albuquerque and Salt Lake City with intermediate stops. The airline only had two pilots and used two C-47 Army surplus planes converted into DC-3s.

Wilson told The Denver Post in 1953 that he remembered the airline's first passenger. "We switched from hamburgers to steaks for that one particular occasion, he said.

Monarch Airlines was off to a rocky start. After one year of operation, the airline was losing $15,000 a month despite the fact that it was carrying more freight than any feeder airline in the country.

Businessmen were skeptical of flying and sending freight by air. Banks didn't consider an airline a good risk and wouldn't lend money.

Near bankruptcy, Wilson went searching for a deep-pocket investor and found multimillionaire Harold Darr of Chicago, president of Scott Radio Laboratories. In return for 51 percent of the airline's stock and the title of president, Darr agreed to pay off Monarch's debt.

In 1950, Wilson realized that Monarch needed to grow. Enlarging the airline's route system would lower per-mile operating costs, he reasoned.

Darr agreed and Monarch purchased Arizona Airlines, a CAB-approved carrier that didn't have enough money to start flights between El Paso, Phoenix and Albuquerque. Monarch later bought Challenger Airlines, which served Montana and Wyoming but was going broke.

The three airlines were merged into a company and renamed Frontier Airlines. The merger gave Frontier 4,000 miles of route and established Denver as a key hub for the Rocky Mountain region — something Frontier would have trouble hanging on to 30 years later.

Five years later, Wilson, then Frontier's vice president of operations, sold his interest in the line and severed all ties with the airline, He became general manager of Loma Uranium Co., and later an adviser to the Colorado Public Utilities Commission on aviation matters. He died in 1979.

Frontier continued to prosper and became one of the most profitable regional airlines in the United States. The airline's revenues expanded from about $10 million in 1960 to $674.6 million in 1984.

In 1967, the airline merged with Central Airlines of Fort Worth, Texas, extending its service to 14 states. By the time deregulation was enacted in 1978, the airline served 89 cities in 20 states and Canada, and service was being added to Mexico.

Fierce fare-cutting

Under deregulation, Frontier held up well in the early years. But when United Airlines and Continental decided to establish hubs in Denver, fierce fare-cutting eventually broke out. Frontier was squeezed by the two larger airlines and began to lose money. In 1983, the airline lost $13.8 million — its first loss in 12 years.

Losses continued to mount and the airline was sold in 1985 to no-frills People Express of Newark, N.J. People Express immediately turned Frontier into a budget carrier and forced passengers to pay for meals and baggage checking. The change, which People Express officials later admitted was a mistake, alienated traditional Frontier passengers, and the airline slid further into debt and closer to its final shutdown.