

## The Man Who Founded Frontier Airlines

### Rodney Baker

Ray Wilson learned his flying in the lays of helmet and goggles, when pilots navigated by the “iron compass” of railroad tracks and used tail skids to slow their landings because they had no brakes. His career grew as fast as the field of aviation itself. He could do anything with an airplane, but mostly his ambition to run his own airline. He almost did it in 1939, but then a war got in the way. Afterward he took two surplus Army airplanes and parlayed them into one of the premier regional airlines in the country.

He was the man who started Monarch Air Lines, which grew up to become Frontier. Ray Wilson was born on a southern Illinois farm in September of 1900, the youngest of five boys and two girls. His mother was a dour, religious woman and his father didn’t believe in sparing the rod. Wilson recalls how his family lived off the corn, oats and wheat they raised in the rocky Illinois soil and how they, “. . .made two trips to the county seat each year for clothes.” But young Ray Wilson thought that book-learning might free him from the tough Midwestern farm life, so he would borrow the horse and buggy to get to the rural high school and “catch chickens and sell eggs for books.”

Wilson got into aviation while working his way through the University of Illinois, when he enlisted in Army ROTC for the extra pay. His major course was electrical engineering — early aircraft design had aroused his interest. The combination of studies led to his selection for a six-week observer’s training course that taught him to draw aerial maps from the back seat of a Liberty-engine Douglas O2H. He graduated from college with an Army Air Corps Observer rating and was picked from the Class of 1923 to be a member of the first class of officers assigned to flight training by the Army Air Corps at Brooks Field in San Antonio, Texas.

Any doubts that flying was his future were dispelled then. Wilson was a natural pilot — a friend described his intuitive ability as “an Indian feel for the air,” and another said, “Ray simply had precision moves in the cockpit. He could do anything with an airplane.” Since opportunities in aviation then were few, however, Wilson went to work for the Denver Gas & Electric Company. But he continued to fly involving himself in the formation of the Colorado National Guard’s 120th Observation Squadron in 1924 obtaining his commercial license in 1927. Finally, in 1929, he resigned to try to make a full-time go in commercial aviation.

Over the next six years Wilson used every chance he had to fly. He took over the Denver franchise of the Curtiss-Wright Flying Service, acting as operations manager, chief pilot and flight instructor until the depression closed the school’s door in 1931. Then he became the permanent duty officer for the 120th Observation Squadron of the Colorado National Guard, which meant everything from the maintenance of the planes to formation flying with the Army Air Corps to mercy missions, airlifting serum into remote rural areas struck by outbreaks of botulism. On the side he did high-altitude mapping for the Forest Service, worked as the private pilot for a Denver family and flew cross-country charter trips for the Denver Post.

Throughout this period — from 1929 until 1949 — Wilson piloted the popular “Christmas Cross”, a battery-operated neon cross, 20-by-30 feet, attached to the underside of a plane he flew through the Denver area at Christmas time.

When war broke out in 1941, several civilian flight schools around the country were training pilots for wartime flying. Wilson thought of operating his own school. He knew he would need a staff of instructors, so he offered 50 of his pilot students the chance to study free in return for their commitments to join him should he land a contract. Then, because the operation would cost more money than he had, he enlisted the support of a good friend, Major F.W. Bonfils, who was business manager for the Denver Post. Together, they got a loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and when the telegram came from Washington awarding Wilson a contract to give flight training to Army Air Corp cadets in Chickasha, Oklahoma, Wilson and Bonfils formed the W&B Flying School. Bonfils was in charge of the finances, while Wilson handled the flight training. Almost everyone in the Denver operation followed Wilson to Chickashaw. The first class of 50 cadets was received in October 1941, and by that time the ground and flight school was disbanded in July 1945, thousands of pilots had learned to fly under Wilson’s supervision.

With the war over, Wilson returned to Denver. He had been asked to come to work for several major carriers, but he still wanted his own airline. He asked the Civil Aeronautics Board to review his 1939 application, and in March 1946, he was granted authority to carry passengers, property and mail on a route from Denver to Albuquerque to Salt Lake City with intermediate stops.

He called his venture “Monarch Air Lines” and the rest, as it is said, is History.

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