

Canada's Love Affair with Katherine Stinson



At the point that Katherine Stinson ventured north of the 49th parallel to do demonstration flying in Canada in mid-1916, she was recognized as one of the world's leading female aviators. Her admirers were delighted she excelled in a field that earlier had been viewed as the sole domain of male pilots. At only just 100 pounds she was a mere slip of a thing, but everything else about her was larger than life!

The aviatrix's radiant smile! The attractive attire! The handkerchief that she often held in her hand! These key elements of her public persona are front and centre in the title page MADE IN CANADA postcard.



Miss Stinson • The Lady Aviator • Arrives At Camp Hughes •
After Flying From Brandon Fair • – July 22nd 1916 –

In the upper postcard mailed from Brandon on **August 31 1916**, Katherine is reported as having been conferred the aboriginal name “Kinyauhdiwe” which translates to, “the girl who flies and returns.” Actually, she was in her mid-twenties! She was of one-quarter Cherokee heritage.

A vintage black and white photograph showing a Ford car, likely a Model T, parked on a dirt road. The car has a driver and several passengers. Behind the car, a large crowd of people, many wearing hats, is gathered behind a wooden fence. A large tree stands to the right of the car. The scene appears to be outdoors, possibly at a public event or race.

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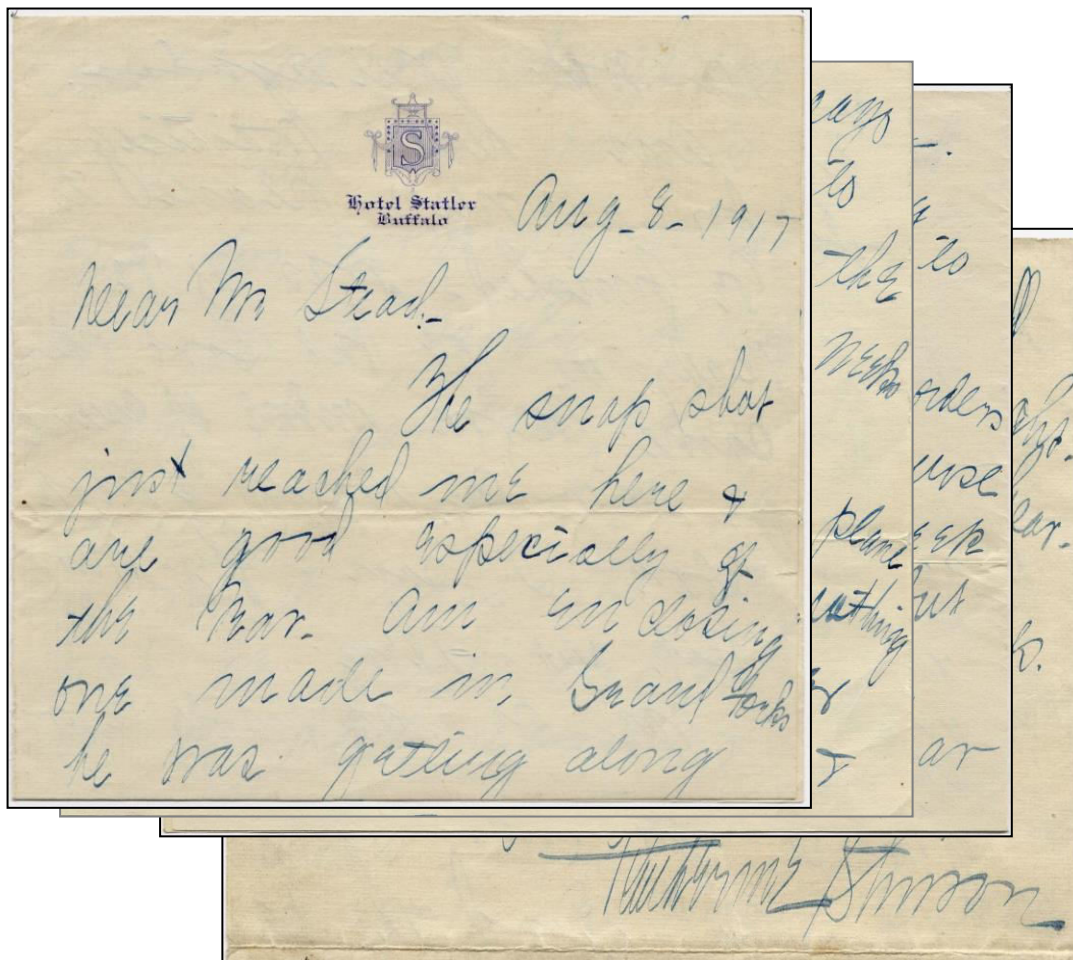
Katherine's Japanese signature, set down in Katakana phonetic characters, is prominent on the message/address side of the lower card. She used a technique still time-honored in Japan—brush and black sumi ink.

These uncaptioned postcards were created from photographs taken at Calgary's Industrial Exhibition grounds in early **July 1917**. For the second straight year the American flyer had crossed into Canada with her biplane by rail, to take part in the country's summer fair circuit.



July 1917, Calgary

The *Partridge-Keller* aircraft in these scenes is the same plane she piloted the previous year. In a letter sent to one of her Canadian fans, Mr. Stead, mention is made of, "waiting for a new plane to be finished" in Buffalo—the *Curtiss Special*. As well, she thanked him for pictures he had sent her.



Hotel Statler
Buffalo

Dear Mr Stead:—

Aug 8 1917

The snap shot just reached me here & are good especially of the Bear. Am enclosing one made in Grand Forks. He was getting along until he got to Chicago & I had nowhere to keep him. Now he is in the zoo for a couple of weeks.

Yes I had—not an accident—but stood the plane up on its nose but nothing hurt. We turned it over on its wheels again & all was well again.

Am here waiting for a new plane to be finished—was to be ready for the 15th but Govt. orders came before mine of course so will be about a week before I can fly but look out then.

Was so sorry to hear of Regina's fire but glad everyone got out all right. There were no deaths I hear. Thanks for the pictures.

Yours Sincerely
Katherine Stinson



Captioned "The Mascot (a bear cub)" — this snapshot taken by Mr Stead was mounted in his album, as were the photos below and at the top of the next page.

The aviatrice is standing at the near side of the automobile, her white shoe only just visible on the auto's running board. Edmonton's exhibition grandstand is in the background.

Tethered by a leash, the bear cub is being comforted by fancily dressed Katherine. Her business manager kneeling at the right is enjoying the amicable scene.

The snapshots that Stead mailed to Katherine quite possibly were duplicates of these photos or of others he had placed in his album.





Pictured at the left—the cub busily eating; at the right—the flyer and her *Partridge-Keller* biplane.

“1916” in the white-ink caption is no doubt a reference to the year that Stinson first flew in Canada. Enlarging the image of the auto’s license plate reveals the year the photos were taken—1917.



The photo Stinson sent Stead, “Am enclosing one made in Grand Forks”, was actually the above picture postcard. The biplane is a *Kuhl-Baysdorfer* she borrowed and flew while her *Partridge-Keller* was undergoing repairs. A smoke flare mounted on the lower left wing of the *K-B* is in full view. Earlier, the *P-K* had caught fire caused by a faulty smoke flare.

July 9 1918: The enterprising aviatrix flew from Calgary to Edmonton in her *Curtiss Special* with a mailbag that contained a reported 259 letters—Western Canada’s first-ever aerial mail. An *Edmonton Bulletin* newspaper reporter described her arrival at the northern city in glowing terms:

“Here she comes!” shouted a thousand voices, and many times that number of necks were craned upwards, and twice as many again of eyes stared into the grey-blue depths of the southern sky.

Far away, looking like some great bird, but approaching with the speed and steadiness which differentiated it from any bird, was what at first was little more than a mere speck in the heavens. Then the outstretched wings of a biplane was discernible and the up-curling rudder, marked with a big red cross.

There was a rush of people to the enclosure, which police and fair officials were powerless to resist. They were swept out of the way like straws.



In this postcard photo, a box of complimentary passes is only just visible on the biplane's fuselage, directly in front of the cockpit. The passes were to be jettisoned above the settlements all along the route to Edmonton. Anyone finding a pass was entitled to free entrance to the city's exhibition and agricultural fair.



Miss Stinson Ready To Leave With First Aerial Service Mail

Several identifiable markings on the aircraft are clearly visible: the military serial number 901 atop the upper wing, Katherine's personal logo on the cockpit door and the biplane's most distinctive feature—the tail section's Red Cross emblem.



Katherine Stinson's personal logo

Bowler-hatted Calgary Postmaster G. C. King is pictured here handing over the mailbag, as the city's Exhibition Manager E. L. Richardson looks on.



Special features of the *Curtiss Special's* OX-5 engine system:

- a. Boyce MotoMeter (heat indicator) in the radiator cap
- b. wind-driven air-pressured wing-mounted fuel pump



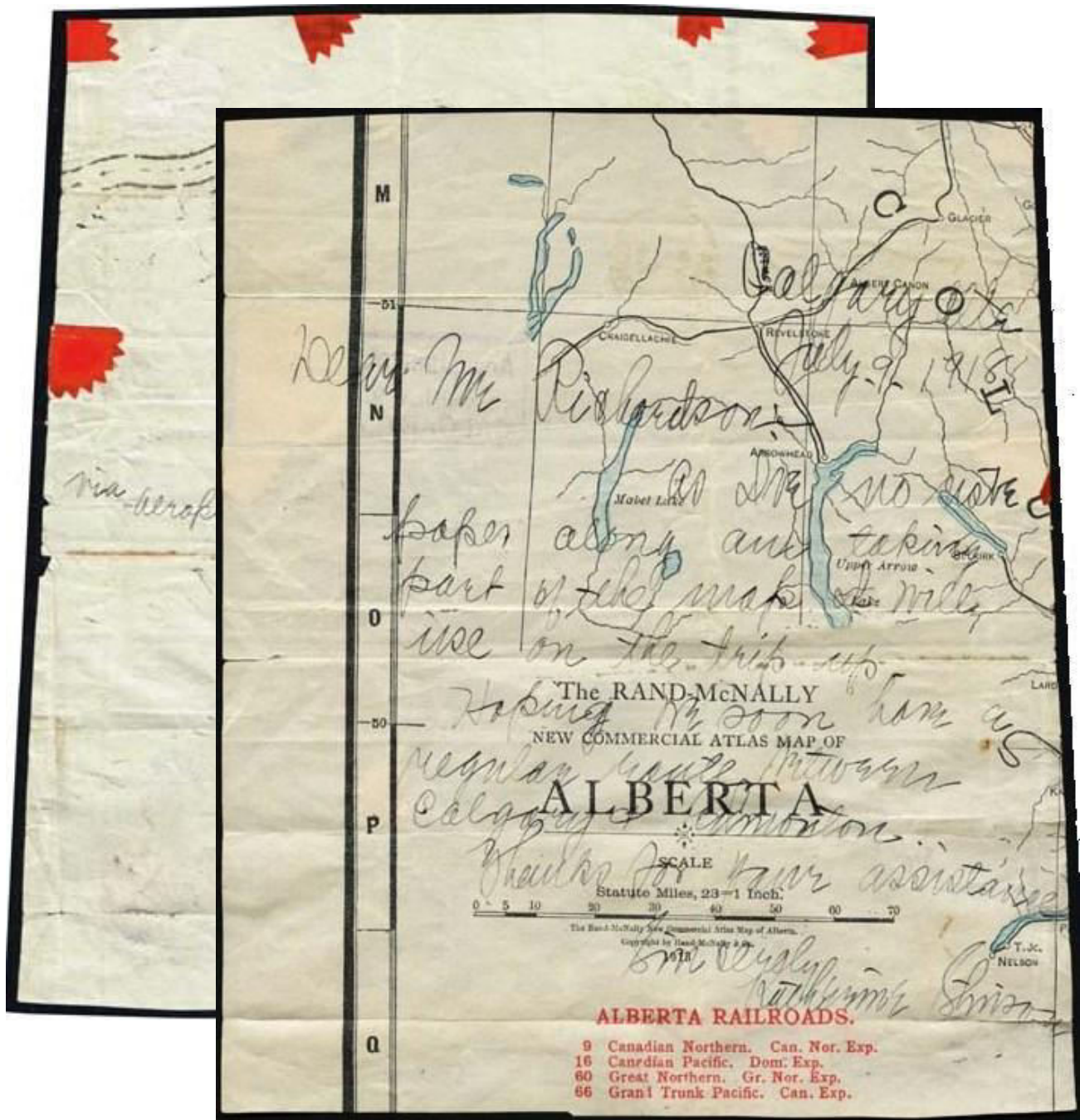
Edmonton Postmaster G. S. Armstrong is pleased in taking delivery of the flown mail, city Exhibition Manager W. J. Stark standing alongside him.

More than twenty mailed covers transported aboard Stinson's July 9 1918 flight have survived, almost all of which are now in the hands of collectors. Five are ordinary postal envelopes. One is a folded map sealed with red legal stickers (next page). Most of the others are folded letterheads also sealed with stickers, such as the eye-catching cover displayed here.



In this letter typewritten on Calgary Industrial Exhibition letterhead paper the morning of July 9th, company secretary Amy Hall informs her mother: "Dearest mother, – This is written in the greatest of haste, just so you would have a letter carried by the first aeroplane mail service in Western Canada and the second in all Canada; and especially as it is to be carried by Miss Katherine Stinson, whom you know.

Yours with love, Amy."



This folded letter—often referred to as the ‘map cover’—is perhaps the most famous of the rare Katherine Stinson covers, being that it is a letter written and signed by her on a piece of the map she used for the flight:

Calgary July 9, 1918

Dear Mr. Richardson: As I've no note paper along am taking part of the map I will use on the trip up. Hoping we soon have a regular route between Calgary & Edmonton. Thanks for your assistance.

Sincerely, Katherine Stinson

At Lethbridge's **July 29-30 1918** fair and stampede, Katherine posed for a photograph with the rodeo champion roper. She is named "THE BIRDGIRL" in the upper postcard's faded white-ink caption. A case might reasonably be made that with her small physical stature she was 'bird-like', but she of course had something else in common with the birds—the ability to fly!



The Lethbridge scene above—"KATHERINE STINSON GOING UP"—presents a near-perfect side view of the *Curtiss Special*. In truth the biplane was rather ungainly, having been constructed in Curtiss's Buffalo plant with an assortment of parts from other aircraft. A greenhorn reporter at one of the shows described it as, "a strange sprawling bird-shaped thing."



The flyer's final flight in Canada was at Peterboro on **September 13 1918**. During her stay in that city she talked to the local press about San Antonio's Stinson Aviation School:

"We have Canadians with us learning to fly, until at the present time we have seventy Canadians as well as hundreds of American graduates of our school at the war front."

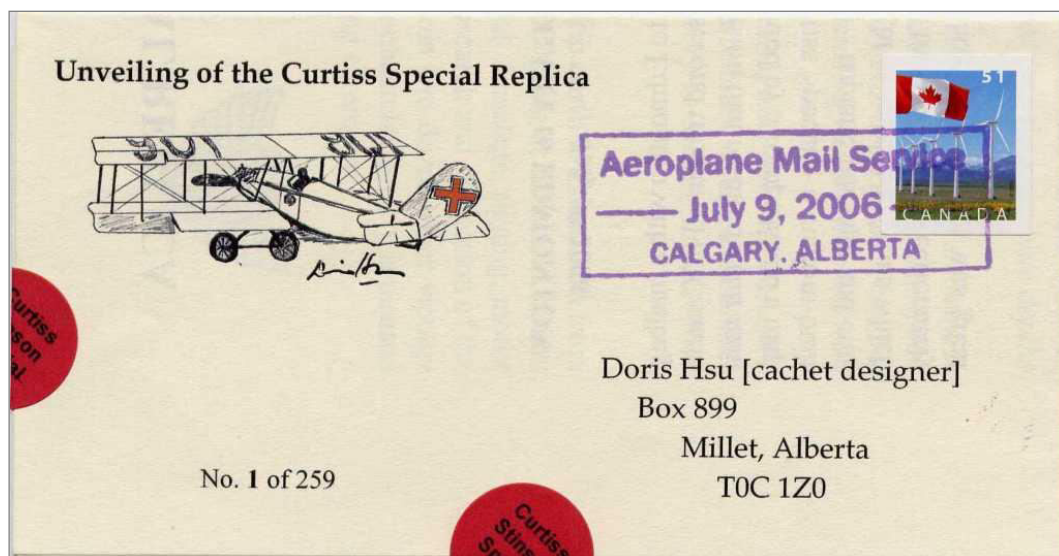


That fall, the aviatrice put her career on hold and sailed to Europe to drive a Red Cross ambulance. She did not do any flying while overseas. Shortly after war's end she returned home, having contracted influenza that later developed into TB. Never again was she to pilot an aircraft!

This envelope is one of the more than 100,000 pieces of inaugural NWT air mail flown during **December 1929**. The addressee requested persons well known to the public to sign his flight covers. Mackenzie King was the “Prime Minister of Canada” in 1929. Katherine Stinson’s aerial exploits of a decade earlier made her name familiar to a large number of Canadians.

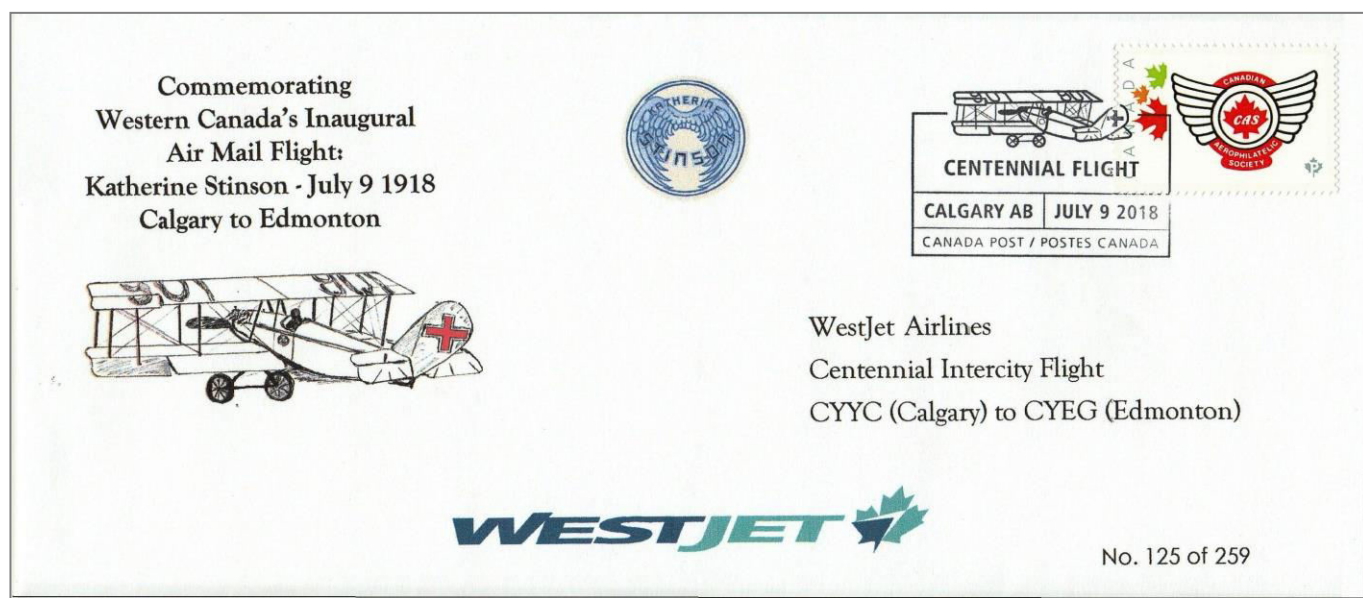


A Calgary→Edmonton re-enactment flight was carried out on **July 9 2006** in conjunction with the unveiling of a static replica of the *Curtiss Special*. Many of the letters flown, such as the one below, were letterheads sealed with red stickers, as had also been the case with Stinson’s inaugural flight.



July 9 2018: An event that marked the Centenary of Katherine Stinson's inaugural air mail flight from Calgary to Edmonton was held on this date, sponsored by the CAS (Canadian Aerophilatelic Society) in collaboration with WestJet Airlines, Calgary Airport Authority and Canada Post.

259 pieces of letter mail were again flown between the Alberta cities in a propeller driven aircraft—this time, however, in a WestJet Q400 NextGen 78-seat turboprop! Each passenger received one of the commemorative envelopes as a memento of the flight. The balance of the envelopes were addressed to members of the Canadian Aerophilatelic Society as well as to WestJet personnel and to others interested in aviation/air mail history.



WestJet Airlines schedules several daily Calgary to Edmonton flights

It is interesting to note that the aviatrix's 1918 flight was the first-ever aerial trip carried out between major urban centres in Western Canada, and that it comprised the first landing of a plane in the immediate area of present-day Calgary International Airport. Her biplane had been forced down there temporarily for fuel pump repair, shortly after lifting off from open prairieland directly to the east of the city's Crescent Heights area.

[Further investigations of Canada's early air mail are identified in resource material listed at the website: www.aerophilately.ca.]

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