



# Smithsonian

*National Air and Space Museum*

## Basil Lee Rowe Collection

Melissa A. N. Keiser

2020

National Air and Space Museum Archives  
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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	National Air and Space Museum Archives
<b>Title:</b>	Basil Lee Rowe Collection
<b>Date:</b>	1917-1973 (bulk 1930-1968)
<b>Identifier:</b>	NASM.XXXX.0019
<b>Creator:</b>	Rowe, Basil Lee
<b>Extent:</b>	5.35 Cubic feet (5 document boxes, 4 flat boxes)
<b>Language:</b>	Collection is predominantly in English, with some materials in Spanish.
<b>Summary:</b>	Basil Lee Rowe (1896-1973) enjoyed a long and successful career in aviation, initially as a military exhibition pilot, barnstormer, air racer, charter operator, flight instructor, aircraft salesman, and rumrunner, before moving to the West Indies to start an airline, the short-lived West Indian Aerial Express, bought out by Pan American Airways in 1928. Rowe became a pioneering senior pilot for Pan Am, flying with them for 28 years before his retirement in 1956. This collection includes scrapbooks, photo albums, memorabilia, and first day covers, in addition to the draft manuscript for Rowe's 1956 autobiography, <i>Under My Wings</i> .
<b>Digital Content:</b>	<a href="#">Image(s): Basil Lee Rowe Collection</a>

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

Basil Lee Rowe, gift, 1969; United States Air Force Museum, transfer, 1973; NASM.XXXX.0019

### Related Materials

See related collection [Basil Lee Rowe First Day Air Mail Covers, NASM.XXXX.0487](#) .

Basil Lee Rowe air racing medals in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum collection:

[Medal, 1926 National Air Races \[Winner, Relay Race\], A19690242000](#) .

[Medal, 1926 National Air Races \[Winner, Relay Race\], A19690243000](#) .

[Medal, Aviation \[Dayton Air Race\], A19690244000](#) .

[Medal, Third Annual Dayton Air Race Winner, A19690245000](#) .

[Medal, 1926 National Air Races \[2nd Place, Free-For-All Race, 510 cu. in. Class\], A19690246000](#) .

[Medal, 1926 National Air Races \[Winner, First Elimination, 500 cu. in. Class\], A19690247000](#) .

Basil Lee Rowe air racing trophies in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum collection:

Trophy, Allen W. Hinkle, Basil L. Rowe, A19690238000 [Allen W. Hinkle Trophy for Two, Three, and Four Place Airplanes, 1924]

Trophy, Glenn H. Curtiss, Basil L. Rowe, A19690239000 [The Glenn H. Curtiss Trophy for Two Seater Low Horsepower Airplane, National Air Races, Mitchel Field L. I., 1925]

Plaque, B.B.T. Corporation, National Air Races 1926, A19690240000 [B.B.T. Corporation of America Relay Race for Commercial Planes won by Basil L. Rowe, Charles S. Jones, A. H. Kreider]

Plaque, 1926 National Air Races, Benjamin Franklin Trophy, A19690241000 [Benjamin Franklin Trophy donated by Joseph A. Steinmetz, Relay Race for Commercial Planes won by Basil L. Rowe, Charles S. Jones, A. H. Kreider]

## Processing Information

Materials in Series 1 (flight log books), Series 2 (loose materials), Series 5 (air mail), and the first two scrapbooks in Series 3 were acquired as a gift from Basil Rowe in 1969 [Acc. Q-55-969]. The remainder of the scrapbooks and photo albums in Series 3 and the manuscripts that make up Series 4 were transferred to NASM from the United States Air Force Museum in 1973 and added to the existing Basil L. Rowe collection materials. The collection was fully arranged, described, and encoded by Melissa A. N. Keiser in 2020.

## Preferred Citation

Basil Lee Rowe Collection, Acc. NASM.XXXX.0019, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

## Restrictions

No restrictions on access

## Conditions Governing Use

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## Biographical / Historical

Basil Lee Rowe, born February 10, 1896, grew up in the small town of Shandaken, New York, in the Catskill Mountains. He began his flying career in 1914 as an apprentice to aviator Turk Adams after seeing Adams fly at a local county fair. Impatient to become a military pilot, Rowe arranged to join the Royal Canadian Air Force, but was sidelined by a ruptured appendix before he could get to Canada. By the time Rowe had recovered, the United States had entered World War I and Rowe was able to join the Aviation Section of the U. S. Army Signal Corps; he was sent to Texas. During the Third Liberty Loan drive, Rowe was assigned to a group of fliers who were to give exhibition flights; after his discharge, he used his savings to buy a used Avro biplane and barnstormed around the East Central United States, using Hadley Field (New Brunswick, New Jersey) as his home field. Rowe soon bought a second aircraft, hired pilot William S. "Bill" Wade, and moved his base of operations to the Aeromarine Base at Keyport, near Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Rowe prospered through the early 1920s, and his troupe the "Rowe Fliers" (including at various times wingwalkers Bill Stacy and Marguerite L. "Peggy" Roome) toured the eastern US giving exhibition flights and passenger rides. In the winter, Rowe moved his operation to Florida, and, with a rebuilt Curtiss Seagull, ferried passengers eager to escape Prohibition from Miami to Nassau, Bahamas--with a bit of rumrunning on the side. Back in New Jersey, Rowe formed the Chamberlin-Rowe Aircraft Corporation with fellow aviator Clarence Chamberlin to buy and resell Army surplus aircraft; the short-lived business went bust in 1924 when the government finished selling off its aircraft. Rowe, a talented racing pilot, kept busy from 1924 through 1926 on the racing circuit, winning numerous prizes.

By the end of 1926, at the age of thirty, Rowe felt that he had reached a turning point in his life. Dismayed by the increase in US government regulation of aviation, Rowe moved his operations to the West Indies, settling in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. With Bill Wade, Rowe rapidly established a business flying charters around the country, with flights to neighboring Haiti and Puerto Rico. In June 1927, with financial backing provided by sugar industry businessmen and the government of the Dominican Republic, Rowe founded West Indian Aerial Express (abbreviated variously as WIAE or WIAX) to provide airline service between Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, hoping to be well positioned to bid on future US foreign air mail routes. With this in mind, Rowe returned to the United States and purchased a Fairchild FC-2W floatplane (christened "La Niña") and a larger Keystone K-47 Pathfinder trimotor (the former "American Legion," r/n NX179, rebuilt by the Keystone factory following a crash in April 1927 and rechristened as "Santa Maria"). To his dismay, Rowe was forced to acquire a US transport pilot license in order to be allowed to fly the "Santa Maria" back to Santo Domingo; he hired Canadian pilot Cy Caldwell to ferry "La Niña." On the way south in mid October 1927, Rowe found himself and his two aircraft in Florida just as Pan American Airways (PAA), which had been successful in obtaining a temporary contract to deliver mail from the US to Cuba, found itself without any aircraft able to fly out of their Key West, Florida, field to fulfill the contract before it expired. PAA struck a deal with Rowe to lease "La Niña" (piloted by Caldwell) to fly the first Pan American Airways flight on October 19, 1927.

With its two new aircraft, West Indian Aerial Express started regularly scheduled twice-weekly flights on December 1, 1927, between Cuba, Haiti, Santo Domingo, and Puerto Rico, later extending the routes to St. Thomas and St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands. On June 30, 1928, WIAX filed a bid with the US government for air mail service on the route from Key West to Puerto Rico, but was outmaneuvered by the more politically-savvy Pan American Airways which won the contract. A final crippling blow was dealt to WIAX in September 1928 when a severe hurricane hit their base in San Juan, Puerto Rico, destroying "La Niña" and two older Waco biplanes. Rowe made his last flight in the "Santa Maria" on September 20, 1928, before turning the aircraft over to Pan American. On October 16, 1928, PAA purchased WIAX, with Rowe becoming PAA's senior pilot.

During his first ten years with Pan Am, Rowe flew a record number of hours and surveyed most of the new air routes through the Caribbean to Central and South America, several times flying with Charles Lindbergh. When the US entered World War II, Rowe was assigned to Pan Am's Africa and Orient Division to serve with the US Army Air Forces Air Transport Command on their supply route across the South Atlantic and Africa to India and China (the "Cannonball Run"). His wife, Florence May Sharp, whom Rowe had married in 1930, served as an aircraft spotter during the war. During the Korean Conflict, Rowe was once again pressed into service, and was transferred to Pan Am's Pacific Division to fly transpacific supply routes and medical evacuation flights. May's early death in 1943 left Rowe a widower at his retirement from Pan Am in 1956. At their Coral Gables, Florida, home he wrote his autobiography, *Under My Wings* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., New York, 1956) and remained active as a tennis instructor until his death on October 28, 1973.

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## Scope and Contents

The collection consists of Rowe's pilot's log books covering his career from 1927 to 1956, assorted periodicals, cartoons featuring Rowe, scrapbooks and photo albums assembled by Rowe (featuring newspaper clippings, photographs, and ephemera), several draft manuscripts of Rowe's 1956 autobiography *Under My Wings*, and first day air mail postal covers collected by Rowe.

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## Arrangement

Materials in this collection are grouped into series by format. See individual series Scope and Content notes for details on arrangement within that series. Note that with the exception of the chronologically arranged flight log books, Rowe did not appear to organize his materials in any particular order.

## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

### Subjects:

- Aeronautics
- Aeronautics -- Competitions
- Aeronautics -- Exhibitions
- Aeronautics, Commercial
- Aeronautics, Military
- Air pilots
- Periodicals
- Works of art
- World War, 1914-1918
- World War, 1939-1945

### Types of Materials:

- Logs (records)
- Photographs
- Publications
- Scrapbooks

### Names:

- Lindbergh, Charles A. (Charles Augustus), 1902-1974
- Pan American World Airways, Inc.
- Rowe, Basil Lee
- West Indian Aerial Express

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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Basil L. Rowe Flight Log Books, 1927-1960

Language: English.  
 Scope and Contents: Log books 1, 2, and 3 are not found in this collection; it is assumed that they were destroyed in September 1928 when a severe hurricane hit San Juan, Puerto Rico, where Rowe was living at the time. Rowe writes, "The Palace Hotel, which I called home, lost its roof, and along with it went all my logbooks, pictures, records, scrapbooks, and personal possessions." [Captain Basil L. Rowe, *Under My Wings*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. (New York), 1956, pages 117-118.]

Box 1, Folder 1	<a href="#">Basil L. Rowe, Flight Log Book 4, 9-22-1927 to 2-16-1929</a> Language: English.
Box 1, Folder 2	<a href="#">Basil L. Rowe, Flight Log Book 5, 02-18-1929 to 10-08-1930</a> Language: English.
Box 1, Folder 2	<a href="#">Basil L. Rowe Flight Log Book 6, 10-10-1930 to 11-21-1932</a> Language: English.
Box 1, Folder 3	<a href="#">Basil L. Rowe, Flight Log Book 7, 12-09-1932 to [11-7-1934] 12-14-1934</a> Language: English. Notes: Chronological flights listed run from 12-09-1932 through 11-07-1934. At end of this log book are separate pages for "Blind flying practice" (06-23-199 through 12-01-1934) and "Night flying" (10-16-1934 through 12-14-1934); all these flights are also listed in the appropriate chronological sections of Log Book 7 and Log Book 8.
Box 1, Folder 3	<a href="#">Basil L. Rowe, Flight Log Book 8, 11-08-1934 to 07-29-1935</a> Language: English.
Box 1, Folder 4	<a href="#">Basil L. Rowe, Flight Log Book 9, 09-04-1935 to 08-04-1937</a> Language: English.
Box 1, Folder 4	<a href="#">Basil L. Rowe, Flight Log Book 10, 08-10-1937 to 08-14-1939</a> Language: English.
Box 1, Folder 5	<a href="#">Basil L. Rowe, Flight Log Book [unnumbered] "1-36 to 2-36, 9/1/40 - 2-41", 01-09-1936 to 02-18-1936; 09-01-1940 to 02-09-1941, 1940-09-01-1941-02-09</a> Language: English. Notes: The first section of this log book contains entries in pencil that replicate entries (sometimes with additional remarks) appearing in Flight Log Book 9 for the period 01-09-1936 to 02-18-1936; the second section replicates entries appearing in Flight Log Book 11 for the period 9-1-1940 to 2-9-1941. Most of the book consists of empty pages.

Box 1, Folder 6      [Basil L. Rowe, Flight Log Book 11, 10-07-1939 to 09-24-1942](#)  
Language:      English.

Box 1, Folder 7      [Basil L. Rowe, Flight Log Book 12, 09-25-1942 to 04-29-1947](#)  
Language:      English.

Box 1, Folder 8      [Basil L. Rowe, Flight Log Book 13, 05-01-1947 to 08-29-1951](#)  
Language:      English.

Box 1, Folder 9      [Basil L. Rowe, Flight Log Book 14, 10-02-1951 to 02-27-1956 \[and 10-07-1960 through 12-30-1960\]](#)  
Language:      English.  
Notes:          The last chronological pages in this log book include entries from 10-07-1960 through 12-30-1960 which Rowe made as a private pilot after his retirement from Pan Am in 1956.

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## Series 2: Loose Materials

Scope and Contents: Periodicals in this series consist of complete copies of publications which contain articles featuring Rowe; cartoons are original drawings which feature Rowe which were published in newspapers. Most of these articles and all of the cartoons also appear in Rowe's scrapbooks as clippings, copies of clippings, or copy photographs.

Digital versions of many items in this series are not available online due to copyright restrictions.

### Box 2, Folder 1      Periodicals, 1 of 3, (bulk 1941-1968)

[New Horizons: The Magazine of America's Merchant Marine of the Air, Volume XI, Number 12, September 1941](#)

Language:      English.

[New Horizons: The Magazine of America's Merchant Marine of the Air, Volume XIII, Number 7, May 1943](#)

Language:      English.

[New Horizons: The Magazine of America's Merchant Marine of the Air, Volume XIII, Number 12, August-September-October 1943](#)

Language:      English.

[New Horizons: The Magazine of America's Merchant Marine of the Air, Volume XIV, Number 7, May 1944](#)

Language:      English.

[New Horizons: The Magazine of America's Merchant Marine of the Air, Volume XV, Number 1, January-February-March 1946](#)

Language:      English.

[The Village Post \[Coconut Grove, Miami, Florida\], Volume 14, Number 4, April 1968](#)

Language:      English.

[OX5 News, Volume 9, Number 1, February 1967](#)

Language:      English.

[Pan American Clipper: Latin American Division, Volume 3, Number 11, August 1946](#)

Language:      English.

[Pan American Clipper: Latin American Division, Volume 4, Number 10, August 25, 1948](#)

Language:      English.

### Box 2, Folder 2      Periodicals, 2 of 3, (bulk 1950-1967)

[The Airpost Journal, Volume 33, Number 10, July 1962](#)

Language:      English.

S.P.A. Journal: Society of Philatelic Americans, Volume 28, Number 4, December 1965

Language: English.

Coronet, Volume 27, Number 5, March 1950

Language: English.

Stamps: Weekly Magazine of Philately, Volume 139, Number 6, May 6, 1967

Language: English.

Box 2, Folder 3      Periodicals, 3 of 3, 1967

Linn's Weekly Stamp News (Sydney, Ohio), July 31, 1967

Language: English.

Box 3, Folder 1      Original Cartoon Drawings

Box 3, Folder 1,  
Item 1

"Basil ROWE," Spanish language cartoon drawing featuring Captain Rowe, unsigned, (bulk circa 1940)

Language: Spanish; Castilian.

Notes: Artist unknown; Rowe notes on an English language version of this cartoon appearing in Scrapbook S-145A (page 2, top left), "Cartoon which appeared in a Buenos Aires [Argentina] newspaper, July 20, 1920." Date is most likely circa 1940; Rowe joined Pan American Airlines (PAA) in late 1928.

Box 3, Folder 1,  
Item 2

Ripley's "Believe It or Not" cartoon drawing. Copyright 1942, King Features Syndicate, Inc., 1942

Language: English.

Box 3, Folder 1,  
Item 3

Ripley's "Believe It or Not" cartoon drawing inscribed to Captain Rowe. Copyright 1954, King Features Syndicate, Inc., 1954

Language: English.

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## Series 3: Scrapbooks and Photograph Albums

**Arrangement:** Items in Rowe's scrapbooks and photo albums are presented in their original order, which appears to be mostly random within a given time period. Clippings and photographs are often duplicated, appearing multiple times on different pages and in different albums.

**Scope and Contents:** Digital versions of some individual scrapbook pages in this series are not available online due to copyright restrictions.

Box 2, Folder 4	<a href="#">Scrapbook A, "Scrap File 1, B. L. Rowe" [Newspaper Clippings], 1925-1931</a> Language: English, Spanish
Box 3, Folder 2	<a href="#">Scrapbook B [Q-969-55 No.1], (bulk circa 1920 to 1960)</a> Notes: Pages as numbered appear to be out of order; sequences run as follows: 59-66, 4 unnumbered pages, 67-100, 61-78, and 101-117 (ending with inside back cover).
Box 4, Folder 1	<a href="#">Scrapbook C [S-145A], (bulk circa 1920 to 1972)</a>
Box 4, Folder 2	<a href="#">Scrapbook D [S-145B], (bulk circa 1920s to 1972)</a>
Box 5, Folder 1	<a href="#">Scrapbook E, Photograph Album 1, 1927-1956</a>
Box 5, Folder 2	<a href="#">Scrapbook F, Photograph Album 2, 1924 - circa 1960</a>
Box 6, Folder 1	<a href="#">Scrapbook G, Photograph Album 3, 1924 - circa 1960</a>

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Series 4: Manuscript Copies of *Under My Wings*, circa 1955-1956[Image\(s\)](#)

Language: English.

Scope and Contents: This series consists of a number of manuscript copies of Captain Basil L. Rowe 's memoir *Under My Wings* in various stages of completion. Folders consist of typed pages occasionally interspersed with handwritten notes on yellow legal paper in Rowe's hand. Most sets of pages show edits and annotations by Rowe; one set appears to have been professionally copy edited, with annotations in blue (and occasionally red) pencil. At least two copies are marked with the name and address of Maurice Crain, Rowe's literary agent. The pages are presented as they were received by NASM Archives as part of the 1973 addition to the collection; the arrangement appears to be erratic, probably reflecting Rowe's editing activities and rearrangement of the chapters as the book developed. The text does include stories and anecdotes that do not appear in the final version of *Under My Wings* published by The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. (New York), in 1956.

Box 7, Folder 1	"Under My Wings" Rough Draft, 1 of 2
Box 7, Folder 2	"Under My Wings" Rough Draft, 2 of 2
Box 7, Folder 3	"Under My Wings" Working Draft, 1 of 7
Box 7, Folder 4	"Under My Wings" Working Draft, 2 of 7
Box 7, Folder 5	"Under My Wings" Working Draft, 3 of 7
Box 7, Folder 6	"Under My Wings" Working Draft, 4 of 7
Box 7, Folder 7	"Under My Wings" Working Draft, 5 of 7
Box 7, Folder 8	"Under My Wings" Working Draft, 6 of 7
Box 7, Folder 9	"Under My Wings" Working Draft, 7 of 7
Box 8, Folder 1	"Under My Wings" String Bound Draft, 1 of 3
Box 8, Folder 2	"Under My Wings" String Bound Draft, 2 of 3
Box 8, Folder 3	"Under My Wings" String Bound Draft, 3 of 3
Box 8, Folder 4	"Under My Wings" Copy Edited Draft
Box 9, Folder 1	"Under My Wings" Final Draft, Annotated
Box 9, Folder 2	"Under My Wings" Final Draft, Not Annotated

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## Series 5: Air Mail Flights

Box 109 (Shared),  
Folder 1

[Messages and Weather Reports, First Cross Caribbean Air Mail Flights, April-May 1930](#)

Notes:

Pan American Airways (PAA) Pilot's Messages, Radiograms, and Weather Reports (plus two PAA Weather Bulletins) generated as part of the First Cross Caribbean Air Mail flight, in Pan American Airways Sikorsky S-38B amphibian (r/n NC142M) piloted by Charles A. Lindbergh (then serving as Technical Advisor to the President of PAA) with PAA pilot Basil L. Rowe. Route was from Miami, Florida (USA) via Havana (Cuba) and Puerto Cabezas (Nicaragua) to Cristobal (Panama Canal Zone, USA), April 26-27, 1930, and return May 1-2, 1930. Messages are generally in Rowe's handwriting, with a few signed by Lindbergh. For the most part, messages and weather reports originate with a land base, although for the long overwater stretch between Havana and Puerto Cabezas they are supplemented with reports from ships at sea or other PAA aircraft (Fokker F-10A, r/n NC810H, and Sikosky S-38B, r/n NC9776) in the area ("midchannel").

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