

Giant Concrete Arrows Across America



These days, technology has made it easy for people to navigate as they travel. But back in the 1920s, things were not so easy.

The U.S. Postal Service began its Transcontinental Air Mail service in 1920. Pilots flying across the United States needed a way to navigate the vast landscape. A few years later, the U.S. Postal Service came up with a pretty cool solution: giant concrete arrows!

The very first pilots had to rely on landmarks to navigate their route across the country. These landmarks weren't always visible during bad weather. So, in 1923, Congress approved construction of a system of beacons to help pilots flying in the rain, or after the sun went down.

The beacons were giant concrete arrows, set into the ground about 10 miles apart. 50-foot towers with powerful rotating gas lights lit up the arrows. They were visible from a height of 10,000 feet.

The first of these beacons was built in 1924, on the route between Ohio and Wyoming. By 1929, the network of beacons stretched from New York to San Francisco.

The pilots were usually former military men. The planes they flew were open cockpit biplanes, and they flew them in all kinds of weather.

The system of beacons and giant concrete arrows was not in use for long. Just three years after the arrows were built, they stopped being of real use to pilots. Advances in technology, such as radio and radar, made the arrows obsolete.

Many of the arrows still exist to this day. They might be covered in weeds, but they're still there, reminding us of simpler times.

1. Thinking about what we have today, how has navigation changed?
2. Do you or your family use any technology to help you navigate?