

Iowa Weird: Infamous Iowa Plane Crashes

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 (AP Photo/Jeff Bundy)

Iowa has a rather infamous history of plane crashes.

Several famous people from the worlds of sports, politics, and, of course, music have lost their lives in the Hawkeye State during aviation-related tragedies. Those losses on top of dozens of others have left a mark on the state.

For this edition of Iowa Weird, we'll recap a few of those incidents:

“The Day the Music Died”



AP Photos

Feb. 3, 1959, is known as “The Day the Music Died,” a reference to the fatal plane crash that claimed the lives of up and coming rock & roll artists Buddy Holly, J.P. “The Big Bopper” Richardson, Ritchie Valens, and their 21-year-old pilot Roger Petersen of Clear Lake.

Hours before the fatal crash, the trio had performed at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, a venue that has hosted some of music’s biggest acts. Think B.B. King, Conway Twitty, The Doobie Brothers, Martina McBride, Santana, ZZ Top, and scores more.

Holly, Richardson, and Valens were in Clear Lake for the “Winter Dance Party” tour, which the [Surf Ballroom website](#) describes as a “complete catastrophe” in terms of its organization because shows were scattered hundreds of miles apart during a miserable Midwest winter.

The next stop after Clear Lake was Fargo, North Dakota. Rather than enduring another long bus ride, Holly arranged for a chartered flight for his band from the nearby Mason City airport; however, bassist Waylon Jennings gave up his seat to Richardson who had the flu, and guitarist Tommy Allsup gave up his seat after losing a coin toss to Valens.

The plane took off just before 1 a.m. and crashed in a field shortly afterward, killing all four passengers.

This is arguably the most famous plane crash in Iowa’s history, although the next entry could also lay claim to that.

United Airlines Flight 232



The tail section of United Airlines flight 232 rests on a flatbed truck after being removed from the crash suite at the Gateway Airport in Sioux City, Iowa, July 22, 1989. Looking on are two of the investigators. (AP Photo/Jeff Bundy)

For Sioux City residents of a certain age, July 19, 1989, is a date they will always remember. That was the day United Airlines Flight 232 crash-landed at the Sioux City Gateway Airport.

Bound for Chicago, the Denver-originated flight experienced a “catastrophic failure of the No. 2 tail-mounted engine,” according to the National Transportation Safety Board report, and had to make an emergency stop.

The flight crew was in the midst of serving meals when Captain Alfred Haynes instructed the senior flight attendant to come to the cabin. He told her to prepare for an emergency evacuation, according to the report.

Per the [Des Moines Register](#), the plane had to be landed while going 250 miles per hour, which is twice the typical speed for landing. As a result, the plane broke into four pieces.

Here is how the impact is described in the NTSB report: “First ground contact was made by the right wing tip followed by the right main landing gear. The airplane skidded to the right of the runway and rolled to an inverted position. Witnesses observed the airplane ignite and cartwheel, coming to rest after crossing runway 17/35. Firefighting and rescue operations began immediately, but the airplane was destroyed by impact and fire.”

There were 285 passengers and 11 crew members aboard the plane. One crew member and 110 passengers were killed; another passenger later died from crash-related injuries.

At the time, this was the deadliest crash in United’s history.

Haynes lamented the loss of life, later [sharing his own account](#). He credited five things that helped the crew save as many people as they did: Luck, communications, preparation, execution, and cooperation.

“When the five factors involved in training for emergencies can act in concert as they did in our case,” he wrote, “they can make the difference between a complete catastrophe and a survivable accident.”

Rocky Marciano



Rocky Marciano raises arm in victory in his dressing room at Yankee Stadium after successfully defending his heavyweight title against Ezzard Charles in New York, June 17, 1954. (AP Photo)

Rocky Marciano was an undefeated heavyweight boxer who retired with a perfect 49-0 record and served as the inspiration for Rocky Balboa, the fictional boxer portrayed by Sylvester Stallone in the Academy Award-winning film franchise.

Marciano died on Aug. 31, 1969, in a plane crash in Newton, about 30 minutes east of Des Moines. The champ was one of three passengers in a small, single-engine plane flying from Chicago’s Midway Airport to Des Moines so Marciano could attend a surprise party in honor of his Sept. 1 birthday.

According to [World History Project](#), Pilot Glenn Belz only had 231 documented hours of flight experience and 35 hours of night flying. His widow told the [Des Moines Register](#) in 1969 that something must’ve gone “wrong with the plane” and said her Korean War veteran husband had 12 years of flying experience.

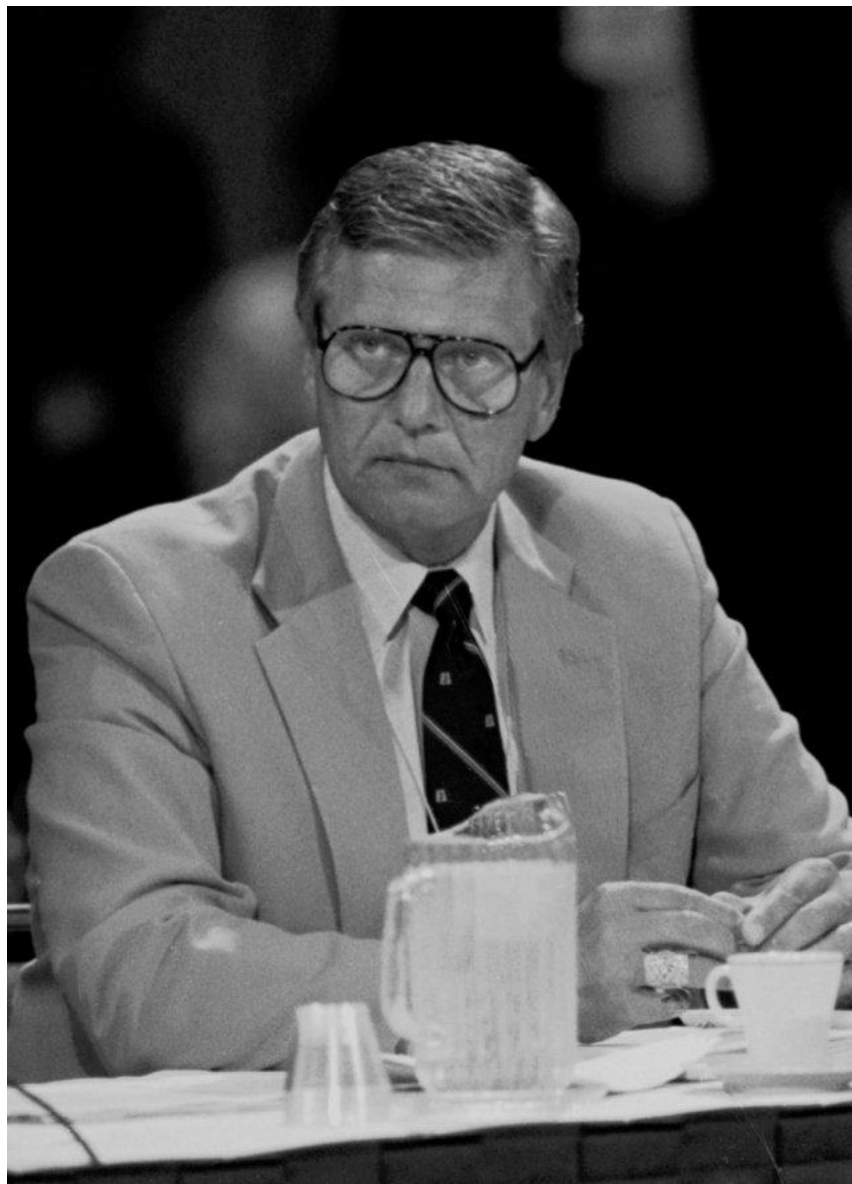
The plane encountered bad weather on the way to Des Moines, and was also getting low on fuel. Belz attempted to land a little after 9 p.m. at the Newton airport.

Here's how aviation-safety.net describes the crash: "A witness to the accident saw the aircraft emerge from the low cloud at about 100 feet above the ground before pulling up into the cloud again. It then reappeared, banking and diving toward the ground. The Cessna struck an oak tree in the middle of a pasture, losing one wing in the impact and bouncing and skidding some 250 feet before coming to rest in a creek bed. There was no fire but the plane was wrecked."

According to the National Transportation Safety Board report, "The pilot attempted operation exceeding his experience and ability level, continued visual flight rules under adverse weather conditions, and experienced spatial disorientation in the last moments of the flight."

Marciano was posthumously inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame's first class in 1990.

The Governor of South Dakota



FILE – In this Aug. 18, 1991, file photo, South Dakota Gov. George Mickelson listens to discussions on health care at the National Governors' Conference in Seattle. Mickelson died 25 years ago in a plane crash April 19, 1993, in an Iowa cornfield. (AP Photo/Gary Stewart, File)

George S. Mickelson was part of a South Dakota political dynasty. His father George T. was the state's governor from 1947-51, while he held the distinction from 1987-93. Meanwhile, his son, G. Mark Mickelson, served six years in the South Dakota House of Representatives.

George S. Mickelson died on April 19, 1993, after a state-owned plane carrying him and seven other people crashed into a farm about 15 miles southwest of Dubuque. No one survived, and Mickelson was the first South Dakota governor to die in office.

Mickelson was returning to South Dakota after a trip to Cincinnati to promote economic development, according to the [New York Times](#). A failed propeller hub was blamed for the crash, according to the [Dubuque Telegraph Herald](#).

Here's how the paper described the aftermath: "The crash scene could have been the set of a disaster movie. Wind-whipped flames leaped from a barn, and the remains of a 65-foot-tall grain silo were strewn hundreds of feet from the point of impact. Gray skies, made even more solemn by a continuous plume of smoke, spit showers on the wreckage and stubborn barn fire, which glowed well into the dusk."

While Mickelson's death was national news, it was overshadowed in coverage at the time by another tragic event: The Waco Siege. On the day of the crash, federal agents ended a 51-day standoff with a Texas religious sect that left 75 people dead.

A Former Nebraska Congressman



President Eisenhower poses with two men Republican congressmen, both from Nebraska, after a breakfast at the White House in Washington on Jan. 13, 1961. With Eisenhower are Rep. Dave Martin of Kearney, left, and Rep. Ralph F. Beermann of Dakota City. (AP Photo/Byron Rollins)

More than a decade after Ralph Beermann lost his re-election bid for a third term in Congress, the Nebraskan born near Dakota City just across the river from Sioux City died in a fatal single-engine plane crash.

Beermann served in the US Army during World War II and developed an early interest in politics, including organizing the Young Republicans of Dakota County in 1946, according to the Nebraska Historical Society. He later went on to represent the state in Congress from 1961-65.

When Beermann lost his 1964 re-election bid, he went back to farming with his brother. He ran for a board seat on the Nebraska Public Power District in 1972 and held a spot until his death on Feb. 17, 1977.

Beermann was piloting a single-engine plane when he crashed at Sioux Gateway Airport. According to the historical society, “His plane apparently caught a pole with its wing and flipped over near the end of the runway.”

The Hubbard, Nebraska, VFW Post is named in Beermann’s honor.

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Grinnell (Iowa) Public Library Archives

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An early aviation pioneer, Billy Robinson of Grinnell was nicknamed “The Birdman of the Prairie.”

As a young man in the late 1800s/early 1900s, Robinson built his first glider out of wires, wheels, and other leftover materials his boss at Grinnell’s Fix-It-Shop allowed him to have, according to [Iowa Heritage Illustrated](#). He was often seen on the west side of Grinnell with his contraption, launching himself off the roof of a nearby

barn or running down a hill. Sometimes he'd glide; other times he'd crash.

Around 1910, Robinson designed and built a monoplane. Although he was married and the sole owner of the Fix-It-Shop by then, he used his creation to run away to the circus—literally. A circus visited the Poweshiek County Fairgrounds and Robinson left town when it did as he and his monoplane became part of the show. He spent a year traveling with the circus, showing off—though never flying—his monoplane.

Robinson found success in the world of aviation. This included working for the National Aeroplane Co. outside Chicago, opening the Grinnell Aeroplane Co—where he designed and built Luxuria, a biplane with a 37-foot, 6-inch wingspan—setting flight records, and surviving multiple crashes including one after his engine gave out 4,000 feet above Chicago's Grant Park.

His luck ran out on March 11, 1916, when he attempted to set a new US altitude record. The record was 17,000 and Robinson's previous high was 14,000. His wife was worried because he got headaches whenever he flew too high, but he still went for it.

On that fateful March day, family, friends, and hundreds of spectators gathered at the Grinnell airfield to watch Robinson attempt to break the record.

Here's what Iowa Heritage Illustrated says happened next: "The plane could be heard high above them for about 30 minutes. Then the skies grew quiet. About this time a farmer three miles south of town heard the sound of an engine sputtering. He spotted Luxuria. It seemed to catch itself for a few seconds, then fall again. Finally it skidded onto the ground at a tremendous speed, hit a ditch, and exploded into a fiery ball."

Robinson died in the crash. It's unclear whether or not he beat the record, although his wife and other townsfolk believe he did.

His hometown airport has two monikers: Grinnell Regional Airport and Billy Robinson Field.

by Ty Rushing

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