Knute Rockne

It was a cold and drizzly March morning in 1931 when TWA Flight 599 departed from Kansas City headed for Wichita. The Fokker F-10 lifted off around 9:15 with Robert Fry in the pilot’s seat, and Jesse Mathias as co-pilot. In the days before the security of seatbelts, the plane’s six passengers sat in wicker chairs with leather cushions. The dark red and silver tri-motor soon rose above the fog and headed south.

As the flight neared the Flint Hills, the weather worsened. At 9:55, the Wichita tower contacted the flight. Mathias replied, “I can’t talk now—too busy,” he said.

The Wichita control tower asked, “What are you going to do?” Mathias replied, “I don’t know.”
At 10:22, Mathias radioed their position. They were on course, 35 miles north of Cassoday, just south of Emporia. “The weather here is getting tough,” he told them. “We’ve been forced too low by clouds. We’re going to turn around and go back to Kansas City.”

The pilot banked the tri-motor to the right while navigating the thick clouds, sleet, and snow.

Station operator O’Reilly in Wichita reported that local weather was satisfactory. Mathias said, “We’ve headed back, but it’s getting tighter. Think we’ll come on to Wichita. It looks pretty bad.”

O’Reilly answered, “Do you think you’ll make it? Can you get through?”

Mathias replied finally, “Don’t know yet, don’t know yet.”

The fog was thick and low when the tri-motor passed over the Baker
family farm near Bazaar, in Chase County. The Bakers heard the plane as it circled, throttled back, and then crashed into the ground. C. H. McCracken, watched the plane’s last moments. “A few seconds after the plane appeared through the clouds a wing came into view. It floated down and landed almost one-half mile east.”

All eight onboard were killed. The plane’s three motors dug deep in the ground, debris was strewn across the pasture.

As recovery efforts began, the Associated Press reported that Notre Dame Coach Knute Rockne may have been a passenger on the flight. Football equipment among the debris confirmed that conclusion.

Jesse Harper lived about an hour away from the crash site. Harper had been Rockne’s football coach at Notre Dame. He arrived to help identify the body of his friend and former player.
Among the most highly regarded college football coaches of his day, Rockne was a native of Norway. He had moved to Chicago at a young age and learned to play football growing up in the city. As a student at Notre Dame, Rockne played a disappointing first season, but returned to distinguish himself as tight end, captain, and All-American. Coach Harper saw Rockne’s potential and turned to him and a teammate to introduce the forward pass, defeating the competition and changing the game of football. After graduation Rockne became assistant, then head coach, where he led the team to three national championships, five undefeated seasons, and 105 victories.

The nation was shocked to learn that Rockne was dead at the age of 43. Newspapers across the country recounted his accomplishments. His funeral mass was broadcast on the radio for the nation to hear. President Herbert Hoover wrote in a telegram to Rockne’s wife: “I know that every American grieves with you. . . his passing is a national loss.”
Rockne’s followers were keenly interested in the cause of the crash. Newspaper articles examined potential causes, while government agencies grounded flights and gathered evidence. Fans became suspicious as one theory led to another—from ice on the wings, to pilot error, to design flaws in the aircraft. They demanded more transparency. Passengers became frightened of air travel and the industry suffered.

Investigators finally concluded that wind and weather were factors in the crash. But more importantly, moisture had seeped into the airplane’s wood laminate over time. This caused the wing joint to weaken. During the flight’s changes in altitude, the wing began wagging up and down, folded back, and tore itself free from the body. The plane had rolled end over end before plunging into the ground.

After the investigation, numerous changes were made in the airline industry. Wooden airplanes were replaced with all-metal aircraft; new
investigation procedures brought independent oversight, more transparency, and added safety regulations. Increased public confidence in air travel led to huge growth in the industry and made way for the Golden Age of Flight.

The crash site near Bazaar in Chase County is marked with a granite memorial, erected on private land in 1935. A Kansas Historical Marker was placed along U.S. 50 to honor Rockne and the other victims. A marker at the Matfield Green service area on the Kansas Turnpike provides travelers with more details about TWA Flight 599.