



Women *of the* Golden Age

*Their airplanes,
and their spirits, still live!*

G.W. Hyatt, EAA 522645

I own Pandora's box. It is a copy of the transient log from Davis-Monthan Field in Tucson, Arizona, often referred to as "the Field." In mid-2000 I purchased the log in Alexandria, Virginia. In flipping through its 218 pages, I'm overcome by 3,679 pilots and their airplanes, thousands of destinations, dates, passengers, and events, all meticulously handwritten between February 6, 1925, and November 26, 1936. Each entry is a window into the golden age of aviation in the American southwest. Half the entries are by sport pilots. The others are military, with a smattering of early commercial transport activity.

Remarkably, among the signatures are 40 female pilots. At the time, they represented conservatively 10 percent of all certificated female pilots in the United States. Many of them have since passed away, but I was curious about the fate of their aircraft. In cross-referencing the facts from the golden age with the physical clues preserved by a few dedicated historians and crafters, I discovered that nine of their aircraft are still on the FAA registry. I visited five and acquired contemporary photos of another.

Pilot Eyes by Jo-Ann Lizio is on display in the EAA AirVenture Museum until June 2004.

Left to right, top: Amelia Earhart, Gladys O'Donnell, Bobbi Trout.

Bottom: Jean LaRene, Ruth Elder, Pancho Barnes.

All these pilots signed the Davis-Monthan log.

Courtesy of Jo-Ann Lizio.

Then and Now

Monocoupe NR8917 Phoebe Omlie (1902-1975)

Miss Moline is a beautiful Monocoupe Model 113 Special, with a 110-hp Warner engine. Flown solo by Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie, it arrived at the Field on a hot Thursday, August 15, 1929. She signed the log at 11 a.m. and departed at 1:30 p.m. for Santa Monica to begin the 1929 Powder Puff Derby to Cleveland, Ohio. When it landed at Tucson, NR8917 had logged about 50 hours.

Phoebe wove her own zodiac throughout her flying career. Competing in the women's division of the 1929 National Air Races at age 26, she was an aggressive and successful air racer. The first female aviation mechanic (Certificate No. 422, dated July 31, 1933), she was a charter member of the Ninety-

Nines. Flying Monocoupes, Phoebe landed at the Field four times; besides NR8917, there was NC5877 and NC518W (twice), which she flew to victory in the 1931 Derby.

Miss Moline is now hangared among sepia wheat fields near Cheney, Kansas, a long way from her Illinois birthplace. When Ed and Leo Saurenman recovered it in 1987 from a hedgerow on the Kansas-Oklahoma border, a tree had grown through the fuselage. They rebuilt the fuselage, but a 1996 storm blew down their hangar and bent its longerons. Without wings, *Miss Moline's* fuselage and tail feathers await restoration to flying condition at the Saurenmans' facility outside Wichita.

Travel Air NC4419 Florence "Pancho" Barnes (1901-1975)

Travel Air 4000 NC4419 has an

appealing history. Built in February 1928, Hollywood stunt pilot Frank Hawks bought it from the factory in March. Powered by a 220-hp Wright J-5-C, he registered it as NX4419, flew it 156 hours for movie work, and sold it in October to H.W. Lippiatt, a dealer.

Pancho Barnes bought it from Lippiatt on November 24, 1928, for \$2,500 and her old Travel Air. After using the Travel Air for "photography and motion picture work," in 1929 she registered it as NR4419 and entered the Powder Puff Derby. A collision with an automobile on the Pecos, Texas, runway ended Pancho's race on August 22.

After the factory made "changes in fittings to correspond with approved type," Pancho registered the Travel Air as NC4419 on July 3, 1930. She landed at Tucson on her way home and signed the log on Wednesday, October 15, 1930, at

12:45 p.m. With passenger Bert White, a well-known parachutist, she was heading to Los Angeles.

Pancho logged 618 hours on NC4419 before Pacific Airmotive Corp. confiscated it in 1933 to satisfy a \$1,649.38 material and labor lien for repairs. Since then the Travel Air changed hands 23 times. Today, Ohioan Mark Pinsky owns NC4419, and David Harwell and the staff of Barnstormer's Workshop in Williamson, Georgia, are restoring it.

Pancho flew the curves of her airborne universe without deflection. She raced airplanes and set records, married and divorced several husbands, founded and operated several businesses, and made and spent a couple of fortunes. In the 1940s she ran the Happy Bottom Riding Club, a postwar watering hole for Muroc test pilots, now part of aviation lore.



.Then: Phoebe Omlie with *Miss Moline* in 1929 at "Powder Puff Derby."

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN UNDERWOOD



Now: *Miss Moline* before wheat fields in Kansas, June 7, 2002.

LEO SAURENMAN



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID HARWELL

Then: This is Pancho Barnes' Travel Air with its original NX registration, probably in mid-1928 when owned by Frank Hawks.

Now: The top left wing of NC4419 in the hangar at Barnstormer's Workshop, November 15, 2002.



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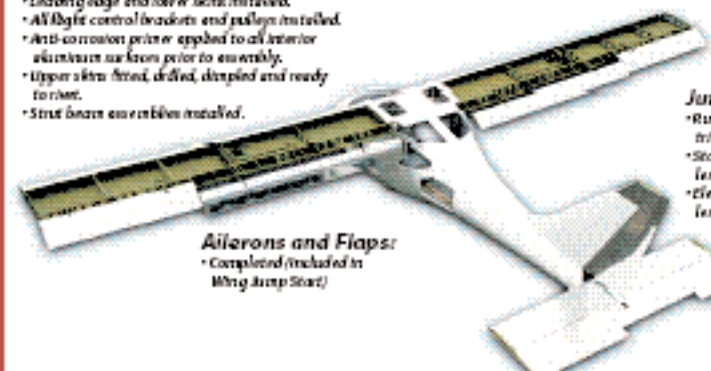
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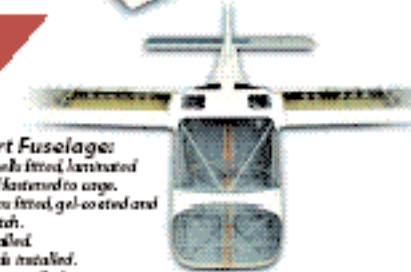
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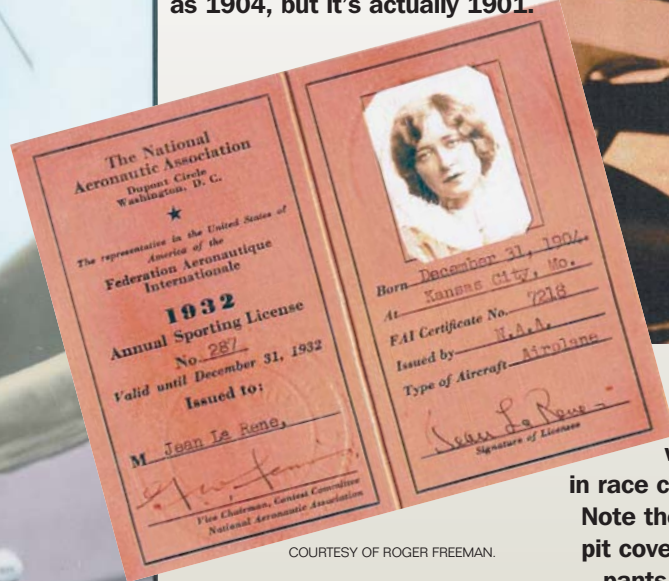
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Jean LaRene's sporting certificate for 1932, issued by the NAA. Her birth date is shown as 1904, but it's actually 1901.



COURTESY OF ROGER FREEMAN.

Then: Jean LaRene with NC592H in race configuration. Note the front cockpit cover and wheel-pants. Courtesy of Roger Freeman.



COURTESY OF ROGER FREEMAN.



Now: NC592H in Kingsbury, Texas, June 13, 2002, with restorer Don Dickson, left, and owner Roger Freeman. Unrestored, the upper right wing hanging on the rear wall still shows a spar splice performed in 1937.

1931, John Nagel bought the Travel Air from the first owner's estate, and passed it to its current owners, Lane and Jean Tufts, in September 1978.

Between August 29 and September 7 the 1931 National Air Races drew fliers from around the country, including Mary Charles, who landed NC684K at Davis-Monthan Field on Saturday, September 12, 1931. Departing from El Paso she was on her way to Santa Monica. Records from the 99s Museum of Women Pilots in Oklahoma City indicate that Mary had logged 110 flying hours as of 1932; at the 1931 race she placed

Rearwin 2000 NC592H Jean LaRene (1901-1960)

Jean LaRene landed in Tucson twice: August 24, 1931, and August 22, 1932, both Mondays. On each occasion she was flying Rearwin NC592H to compete in the National Air Races in Cleveland. In 1931, she flew the Rearwin *Ken-Royce* to fourth place in the 30-mile pylon race, and in 1932 she had a forced landing in wilderness north of Abilene, Texas. Neither she nor NC592H were injured, but she had to drive to Cleveland.

The cream, orange, and black airplane was manufactured in February 1930 in Salina, Kansas. Powered by 185-hp Curtiss Challenger engine, *Ken-Royce* cost \$6,500 new and is one of only three Model 2000-C Rearwins made. Jean didn't own the airplane; Long & Harman Airlines at Love Field in Dallas purchased it in 1931 and hired Jean to fly it.

Roger Freeman now owns the airplane and holds with great care the files and memorabilia of Jean's life in aviation. Born Florence Lorene Donohue on December 31, 1901,

she married early and had two sons and a daughter by 1925. She divorced, and the children went to a foster home, which caused her much discomfort. It's not clear why she changed her name to Jean LaRene, but it happened during the late 1920s.

Jean learned to fly in 1928 at Chicago Municipal Airport and was a founding member of the Ninety-Nines. Until 1936 she raced, hopped passengers, flew endurance events, and made friends. In her address book are such famous female pilots as Amelia Earhart, Ruth Stewart, Gladys O'Donnell, and Clema Granger.

After a number of relationships that ended in divorce, death, and Dear John letters, one association, with Lou Foote, endured in her life and diaries. She married Foote, an aviation pioneer in his own right, in 1936. They operated Lou Foote Flying Service, a pilot training and Cub dealer in Dallas, Texas. Jean was the company pilot, demonstrating Cubs and transporting passengers in a Stinson and a Travel Air.

In her diary, Jean wrote on May

27, 1934, "Flew *Ken-Royce* for last time today. Going to sell it." And on June 15, "Mr. [Harman] sold *Ken-Royce* to Bob Albright the other day." The Rearwin passed through seven more owners, until Jean and Lou bought it in 1940. In 1997 Roger Freeman acquired *Ken-Royce* as part of Lou Foote's estate.

NC592H now lives at the Old Kingsbury Aerodrome in Kingsbury, Texas. The fuselage and tail feathers are restored. The metal tube fuselage and cockpit aprons are original; the wooden stringers are new. It is almost ready for fabric. The wings are "rough," still showing a major spar splice performed and documented in 1937. Although there is no timeline for completion, the Rearwin *will* fly again.

Travel Air NC684K Mary Charles

Rare is the airplane that has one owner for almost a half-century, and an E4000 Travel Air, NC684K, is one of these unusual airplanes. Powered by a 165-hp Wright J-6, the airplane was manufactured September 2, 1929. On January 22,

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third in the dead-stick landing contest and won \$40.

In the summer of 1934, Mary teamed up with Pancho Barnes and Bobbi Trout for the first female transcontinental formation flight between Los Angeles' Union Air Terminal and New York's Roosevelt Field. Unfortunately, Mary had to turn back with engine problems.

Before her death in 2003, Bobbi said Mary's husband sold pipe organs to theaters in the Los Angeles area before World War II. His death left Mary impoverished, and during the war she worked for the military in Fresno, California. After the war, she became reclusive in Santa Monica, declining to visit even with old friends, like Bobbi, who called on her.

Its restoration in the planning stage, Travel Air NC684K survives as a fuselage, landing gear, and right horizontal stabilizer, snug in the loft of Lane and Jean's Moorpark, California, barn.

Travel Air NC8192 Mildred Morgan

Mildred Morgan was a well-respected pilot and racer. Her husband, Thomas E. Morgan, was president of Pickwick Airways, which owned NC8192, a Travel Air 4000 built in 1929. A photo of it when new isn't known to exist, but the biplane left the factory dressed in dark blue with silver wings.

Learning to fly in Hawaii during 1929, Mildred competed in the National Air Races from 1929 to 1932 and made her mark in two. In 1930 she won \$2,100 flying NC8192 to a second-place finish with a time of 21 hours, 8 minutes, and 35 seconds. She won another \$300 by finishing third in the 50-mile race for open-cockpit airplanes (at an average speed of 107.24 mph) and \$80 in dead-stick landing contests. In 1931, the cross-country race ran from Santa Monica to Cleveland, and Mildred finished eighth. In the women's 25-mile race she placed fourth (104.519 mph).

After the 1931 race she competed in a cross-country race from New Orleans to Los Angeles, which brought the Travel Air to Tucson at 10:10 a.m. on Saturday, September 19, 1931. She was back in the air a half-hour later.

Mildred partied frequently with Pancho Barnes, wrote aviation arti-

cles, and hosted gatherings of the Ninety-Nines in California. In a 1932 article she described one gathering as "a reception for over 100 people, forty-three of whom were licensed women pilots, the largest group of them ever to have congregated in the world at one time or place."



COURTESY OF RUSS WARD

Now: Mildred Morgan's NC8192 in New Zealand, fuselage hopper installed for agricultural dusting, and wings squared.



COURTESY OF LANE TUFTS

Then: Travel Air NC684K at Whittier, California, with possibly its third owner, Roy C. Patten.

Now: Current owner Lane Tufts stands beside the robust fuselage of Mary Charles' Travel Air NC684K in Moorpark, California, September 22, 2002.



Intensely interested in the roles of women aviators, Mildred was actively involved in the Betsy Ross Corps, which evolved into the Women's Air Reserve. She became secretary of the Ninety-Nines Southwest Chapter in November 1931, and fought along with the Associated Motion Picture Pilots organization to improve the salaries and working conditions of pilots who performed for the movies.

After its racing career, Mildred's Travel Air lived a utilitarian life. From 1937 to 1997 it was a crop duster in Lodi, California, spreading sulfur on Tokay table grapes. NC8192 now lives an easier life in New Zealand, where owner Russ Ward gives sightseeing rides to tourists.

Beech B17L NC14415 Nancy Harkness Love (1914-1976)

Love brought 21-year-old Nancy Harkness Love to Tucson on January 25, 1936, a stop on her honeymoon after marrying Robert Love in Boston on January 11. Robert operated Boston's Inter City Airlines, which owned the Beech Staggerwing the Loves flew.

Manufactured on March 30, 1935, it had a 225-hp Jacobs L4 turning a wooden, two-blade Hartzell propeller, and Robert special-ordered it in Diana Cream and Stearman Vermillion Red. The Loves owned the Beech for 28 months. After their stewardship, it changed hands 11 times and spent most of its life in the west before moving east to its current owner, Ranley Nelson.

During World War II Nancy was the executive director of the Air Transport Command Ferrying Division staff, and she was the first woman to check out in the P-51 and the first woman to fly the B-25. Eventually checking out in 18 different military aircraft, she was an aviation industry leader for years and championed the recognition of

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COURTESY OF THE STAGGERWING
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Then: N14415 on the Orange County Airport ramp, August 9, 1957. There is a “For Sale” sign in the window. Examination of stripped fabric and maintenance records suggest the airplane is red with white accents in this photo.

Now: Ranley Nelson with N14415 undergoing restoration in Butler, Pennsylvania, November 23, 2002.

Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) as veterans of military service. They gained recognition in 1977, a year after her death in 1976.

Her Staggerwing is under restoration in Ranley’s shop, Airplane Makeovers, at the Butler (Pennsylvania) Farm Show Airport. Its fuselage and control surfaces are now in fabric, and, given its place among other restoration projects in his shop, Ranley says it should be flying, “in a couple of years.”

Sociology & Legacy

In one brief decade the heart and spirit of the golden age waltzed through the Tucson desert oasis. Between July 10, 1928, and August 22, 1936, the 40 women, all sport pilots, landed at Davis-Monthan 57 times.

Did they have an effect? Was their adventure and persistence with purpose? Certainly, their numbers are affirmative. When the Ninety-Nines organized at the end of 1929, there were 126 U.S. certificated female pilots. In the

following decade, when America transitioned from flappers and Prohibition to the Great Depression and the New Deal, their number grew to 675, a five-fold increase.

Unlike their airplanes, none of the six pilots mentioned here survives, but their exploits live on in print. The *New York Times* published 1,265 articles on female aviators during that period, an average of three a week—and that is just one newspaper. Not surprisingly, articles about female aviators in the 1920s and ‘30s popular press are foreign by today’s standards. “Girl fliers,” “aviatrix,” and other phrases and attitudes are rightly out of place today. Some articles connected the pilots to their husbands, or even mechanics, as if anchoring them to a male image might increase their credibility!

Yet, these women demonstrated characteristics of most pilots in the golden age: independence, intelligence, bravery, and what Harvard University calls “pioneer

cussedness.” They serviced their ids at a time when doing so was considered freakish by many of their male and female contemporaries. They flew leading-edge aircraft (some before certification), in exciting contests, under stressful conditions. They held positions of responsibility in developing aviation industries. In any era, their behavior, experiences, and accomplishments are truly the stuff from which ripping yarns are made.



G.W. Hyatt extends warm thanks to the archives staff at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum; the home office and southwest section of the International Ninety-Nines; Davis-Monthan Air Force Base; and the aircraft owners and restorers. Thanks also to Joel Harris for use of his colorized portrait of Jean LaRene, to Jo-Ann Lizio for Pilot Eyes, and Amy Laboda for her blue pencil. Special thanks to Bobbi Trout for sharing her personal memories of these women.