

Breaking Through the Clouds: The First Women's National Air Derby

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(PHOTOS: Courtesy of Heather Taylor, unless otherwise noted)

In the summer of 1929, Amelia Earhart and nineteen other female pilots sped across the country in some of the best airplanes of the day. A Monocoupe 113, a Waco Taperwing, an Alexander Eaglerock Bullet and several Travel Airs including a D-4000 Speedwing were just a few of the “modern” airplanes used by the pilots in the First Women's National Air Derby. Their goal was to prove that flying was a safe means of transportation and that women were competent pilots. As the women raced from Santa Monica, California to Cleveland, Ohio over 9 grueling days, they encountered everything from navigational challenges, weather conditions, mechanical difficulties and threats of sabotage. In addition, the women battled social stereotypes. Undeterred, these twenty energetic young pilots were full of optimism. They set out to prove to the world that their love of flying did not bend to discrimination.

It all began when Elizabeth Ulysses McQueen, founder of the Women's International Association of Aeronautics (WIAA) approached Henry Wetzel, VP and General Manager of Douglas Aircraft about the possibility of having a women's air race in conjunction with the National Air Races. Touted as the Air Classic of the Century, the 1929 National Air Races were to be held in Cleveland, Ohio. The National Air Races were one of the most popular events of the day but before 1929, they were not open to women.

Wetzel arranged a meeting with Cliff Henderson, the managing director of the National Air Races, and McQueen in May 1929 to discuss the idea of the women flying across the country in an all out speed race and landing in Cleveland, Ohio while the National Air Races were underway. Henderson immediately seized on the notion, recognizing the promotional possibilities. The women's race would bring attention to the National Air Races and would be good public-relations for the individual companies sponsoring the women in the race. Additionally, the women could use the publicity as a proving ground to showcase their aviation skills and to smash that glass ceiling above the clouds.

Of course there were plenty of individuals who objected to having women piloting airplanes in 1929. Women

had just won the right to vote 9 years earlier. Many in society were not yet comfortable with women driving cars, let alone flying airplanes. However, it was also a prolific time in history. There was no sense of the impending stock market crash. People had a feeling of invincibility. It was the golden age of aviation. Charles Lindbergh had crossed the Atlantic in 1927, and Amelia Earhart became the first woman to cross the Atlantic in an aircraft with her crew in the Fokker Tri-motor, “Friendship” the following year. The sky was the limit and pilots were the movie stars of the day, enjoying a hero's status.

Henderson worked on the publicity for the women's air derby while McQueen approached women who were already proving themselves as accomplished pilots, some of whom had set endurance, speed and altitude records. These record setters included Marvel Crosson, Bobbi Trout, Phoebe Omlie and Louise Thaden among others. In fact, Thaden was the first woman to hold all three records at one time. The women readily signed up to participate in the race as did other known pilots of the day such as Gladys O'Donnell and two international pilots; Thea Rasche from Germany and Jessie Maude “Chubbie” Keith-Miller from Australia.

When the rules of the women's air race were being set, the National Racing Committee (NRC) initially wanted mechanics to fly along with the women. The women rebelled stating that if this happened, they would not be credited with flying the airplane or in some cases, Hollywood starlets would be brought in to “fly the plane” when the mechanic was actually the one piloting. No, the women wanted to prove their skills beyond a shadow of a doubt. This would not be the last time the women would band together to show their dedication and focus to their mission.

Spearheaded by Amelia Earhart, the women also objected to another rule the NRC wanted to implement which was to restrict the size of the airplanes entered in the race. The women argued that they wanted the option to be able to fly the biggest, fastest ships available if they so chose. The NRC relented and established two classes of airplanes: the CW (Light) class and the DW

(Heavy) class. The CW class was for any plane that had under 510 cubic inch displacement in the pistons and the heavy class was for the planes over the 510 cubic inch displacement. By 2pm on August 18th, 1929, seven planes in the light class division and twelve planes in the heavy class were lined up and ready for take-off in Santa Monica's Clover Field. A thirteenth heavy-class aircraft piloted by Mary Haizlip joined the race a day late due to mechanical and logistical problems.



A signed portrait of Bobbi Trout. Bobbi passed away in 2003 at age 97.
 (Photo: Courtesy of The Bobbi Trout Estate)

Bobbi Trout, one of the most famous pilots in California during that time, entered her Golden Eagle LeBlanc in the light class division of the race. Her sponsor, R.O. Bone, was so supportive of Bobbi's participation that he had mechanics working until the night before the race installing a 100 horsepower Kinner motor instead of the 90 horsepower motor that was originally in the plane.

Other pilots in the light class division included, Phoebe Omlie, flying a Monocoupe 113 and Edith Foltz with an Alexander Eaglerock Bullet. The Bullet was a novelty in 1929 as it was one of the first airplanes with a retractable landing gear. The January 24th, 1929 edition of The Wichita Eagle had the following description: "the landing gear draws up in the wing like a ducks feet". By far the most popular plane in the race was the Travel Air. There were 6 Travel Airs in the heavy class

division and one Travel Air in the light class division for a total of seven Travel Airs. Walter Beech, President of Travel Air, was very involved and supportive of the women's air race. In fact, Beech sponsored his employee, Louise Thaden. Beech had a Travel Air 4000-D Speedwing built for Thaden. Thaden's plane was so fresh off the factory floor that she only had time to fly a quick pattern around the Wichita airfield before heading off to Santa Monica to start the race. Other pilots who flew Travel Airs for the event included Marvel Crosson, Pancho Barnes, Opal Kunz, Blanche Noyes and Mary Von Mach. Claire Fahy flew the sole Travel Air participating in the light class division.

Other notable planes in the derby included a Waco Taperwing flown by Gladys O'Donnell, a Lockheed Vega flown by Amelia Earhart and a DH Gypsy Moth flown by Thea Rasche.



Jessie Keith-Miller (a.k.a "Chubbie")
 (Photo: Courtesy of The Ninety-Nines)

The story behind each of the women who participated in this amazing race has intrigued me for well over a decade. Uncovering everything from the details of the airplane to the women's personal history to the circumstances of the actual race has proven to be my own personal passion. As a result, I left my full time job two years ago to put everything I have into producing a documentary about the race, which currently has a working title of Rag Wing Derby.



Modern day aviatrixes, Patty Wagstaff (left) and Julie Clark (right) posed for this photo after being interviewed for Heather's film. Heather (c) looks very happy to have them there!

Some of the biggest joys for me during this journey has been finding footage of the actual race; interviewing legendary pilots Elinor Smith Sullivan, Patty Wagstaff and Julie Clark; getting to know some of the family members or friends of the women; and an incredible opportunity to film some of the same model airplanes used in the race including several Travel Airs, Monocoupes, a Waco and a Fleet. Hearing, smelling and touching these airplanes helped put me behind the goggles of the incredible young women of 1929 and understand the feeling of adventure and freedom they must have experienced. It is my hope to capture this feeling on film and to bring the women's incredible story to today's audience, inspiring others to follow their own dreams.



The 2009 Lineup for Heather's film includes Bob Coolbaugh's Monocoupe, Mike O'Neal's Fleet and other Golden Age Classics.

As I sit in the edit bay now, working to pull this story into a cohesive narrative (and cringing at the thought of having to leave anything out of the film), I think about

the pioneering women who had the courage to follow their passion and became real life test pilots. Through their example, we can all learn how to follow our own passion, no matter how many say it is impossible.

To learn more about the race and the documentary, please visit my website at www.RagWingDerby.com. Become a fan on my Rag Wing Derby Facebook page and stay tuned for the release of the documentary chronicling the story of the first Women's National Air Derby. ■



Ten of the participants in the First Women's National Air Derby. From left to right: Mary von Mach, Jessie Keith-Miller (ie "Chubbie"), Gladys O'Donnell, Thea Rasche, Phoebe Omlie, Louise Thaden, Amelia Earhart, Blanche Noyes, Ruth Elder and Vera Dawn Walker.

(PHOTO: Courtesy of Saint Louis University Special Collections, Parks Air College Collection)



Heather Taylor is the Executive Producer of Rag Wing Derby (working title). She is currently in postproduction and plans to premiere the film in early 2010. She is seen here seated in Joe Santana's beautiful 1928 Travel Air 4000.