

African american woman in aviation history essay



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In the early 20th century, it was virtually unheard of a woman especially an African -American woman in aviation. Flying was predominantly for white males (Creasman, 1997), and considered too dangerous for females. In an era of racism, and segregation Bessie Coleman born a poor, black girl with limited opportunities' persevered. Bessie broke the barriers of stereotypical labels for race, gender, and class by becoming the first black woman to obtain a pilots license, the first person in the world to obtain a international pilots license, and the first American to achieve this (Malveaux, 2000).

Bessie Coleman is a " role model for young black children" (Creasman, 1997, para. 23), influencing others to pursue their dreams. Bessie paved the road for others, never letting prejudices ' of " race, class, and gender" keep her from pursuing her dreams which provoked the start of the civil rights era(Creasman, 1997). Despite the odds of being poor, black, and female Bessie Coleman made a huge impact in American history.

Bessie Coleman was born in Atlanta, Texas in 1892 into an environment of poverty, repression, rage and fear (Rich, 1993). It was a era when blacks were disenfranchised and lynched (Rich, 1993). African-Americans were taught and treated like they were inferior to other races. Blacks could not vote, buy land, ride in the same train sections , use the same bathrooms, restaurants, or use the same drinking fountains which whites used (Barnes, 1996). Those which protested ran a risk of being " tarred, feathered, whipped or lynched" (Barnes, 1996, para. 4). The nation was suffering from a " severe economic depression" (Rich, 1993, para. 14), and violence began to ignite in both " black and white communities" (Rich, 1993, para. 14). Rich industrialists began to " create monopolies in trade and industry while

laborers worked twelve-hour days, seven days a week. When the workers unionized and called strikes, the industrialists hired armed men as strike breakers” (Rich, 1993, para. 14). In 1893 violence continued and panic among the financial sector caused stocks to drop . Soon banks folded, farmers lost their land, factories shut down, prices fell and unemployment increased (Rich, 1993).

Bessie was the 12th of 13 children, the daughter of George and Susan Coleman. At the age of seven Bessies’ father, a nearly full-blooded Indian decided to move to Oklahoma closer to Indian territory. He believed he and his family would receive better treatment and receive the benefits of “ full civil rights,” something the family did not experience in Texas because of racial discrimination. However, Susan refused to uproot the children and stayed behind (Yount, n. d.).

Susan and the children lived in a “ one room cabin,” and picked cotton to survive. Unable to make ends meet Susan took a job cleaning and cooking for a white family. It was important to Susan for the children to earn an education, so Bessie took on the role as a surrogate mother while Susan worked. Bessie did not have the life of a “ carefree child”(Rich, 1993, para. 34), instead she cleaned, ironed, cooked, and made sure her brothers and sisters were taken care of (Rich, 1993).

Bessie and her siblings attended an all black school, but learning was limited because each time it was “ cotton picking time” the school shut down. There were rarely textbooks, pencils or paper, and one teacher with a sixth grade education for grades one through eight in a single room building (Rich,

1993). However, Bessie was eager to learn, and had big dreams of “ amounting to something” (Bessie Coleman, n. d. para. 4). By age eight Coleman along with her siblings learned to read and write from reading the bible. Bessie enjoyed reading and often read books about black men and women which had made accomplishments in life (Barnes, 1996, para. 12). Gifted in math, she kept track of the family book keeping for the cotton sold (Bessie Coleman, n. d. para. 2). Bessie completed the eight grade which in those days was the highest grade individuals could achieve. In addition, Coleman was the top of her class, a very rare accomplishment at that time for black females (Smith, n. d.). This eagerness to learn prompted Bessie to attend college. Bessie took in laundry and saved enough money to attend college in Oklahoma but ran out of money after one semester and returned home.

After working and saving for several more years, Bessie decided to move to Chicago to live with her brother and pursue a career as a manicurists (Creasman, 1997). Sitting in the “ black car” on the train ride to Chicago was a quick reminder of the oppression which Bessie was trying to escape. In addition new fears like the Klu Klux Klan were manifesting throughout the United. States, and especially welcomed in Chicago among the white protestants. This brought about new threats to the African Americans and immigrants. “ Each national group formed a cultural enclave with its own schools, churches, synagogues, associations, and clubs” (Rich, 1993, para 17).

It was when Bessies brothers went to France to fight in World War one, Bessie became interested in becoming a pilot (Yount, n. d.). After finishing <https://assignbuster.com/african-american-woman-in-aviation-history-essay/>

school, Bessie worked as a manicurists and waitress to save money for aviation school. Bessie quickly gained the reputation of one of the best manicurist in Chicago. This reputation enabled Bessie to mingle with many of the cities wealthy and powerful citizens (Smith, n. d.).

Unfortunately, segregation laws prevented Bessie from “ enrolling in an aviation school in the United States” (Creasman, 1997, para. 8). “ The Jim Crow segregated schools only catered to white men and a few white women claiming there was “ no room for blackbirds in the sky over America” in the early days of aviation”(Creasman, 1997, para. 8). Bessie did not let this stop her. “ The respect and attention she longed for, her need to “ amount to something,” were directed at last toward a definite goal. Ignoring all the difficulties of her sex and race, her limited schooling and present occupation, she set off to find a teacher”(Rich, 1993, para 28).

Bessie turned to friend Robert S. Abbott, “ founder, and editor of the Chicago Weekly Defender newspaper” (Yount, n. d. para. 12). Abbott suggested Bessie go to Europe for pilot training (Yount, n. d.) where prejudices’ were not as great. Bessie studied French in preparation of going to Europe, and with the assistance of Abbott, and Jesse Binga president of Binga State Bank, enough money was raised to send Bessie to school in Europe (Creasman, 1997).

In 1921, Bessie enrolled in the Federation Aeronautique International School in France. Bessie “ took additional training from chief pilot for Germany’s Fokker Aircraft Company along with many other French and German pilots” (Creasman, 1997, para. 8). In 1922 Bessie Coleman was the first African-

American in the world to earn a international pilots' license, and the first American to achieve this (Creasman, 1997). " She was hailed by airmen and aircraft engineers in France, Germany, Holland, and Switzerland as the greatest aviatrix in the world" (Freydberg, 1998, Para. 8).

Coleman returned to the United States with dreams of opening an aviation school for black pilots. Bessie quickly realized it would not be easy for a female of color to make a living flying. Bessie decided to use her " barnstorming skills" in exhibition flights and give lectures encourageign other African Americans to pursue an aviation career in aviation to earn extra income (Creasman, 1997).

Coleman made her first appearance in 1922, " at an event honoring veterans of the all-black 369th American Expeditionary Force of World War I. Held at Curtiss Field near New York City" (Smith, n. d. para. 13), which her friend Abbott and the Chicago Defender newspaper sponsored (Smith, n. d. para. 13). The paper later referred to Bessie as " Queen Bess" (Yount, n. d. para. 16), a name, which would remain with Colemans fans (Bessie Coleman, n. d. para. 10).

Despite popularity Bessie still " endured countless obstacles from both whites and blacks" (Bessie Coleman, n. d. para. 10). Black men were jealous of Bessie for doing what they were unable to, black women, " despite activism for civil liberties and better schools, were often too socially conservative to accept Bessie's vibrant persona" (Bessie Coleman, n. d. para. 10). " Black newspapers gave her publicity, but they were smaller in

circulation. White newspapers often either ignored her altogether, or belittled her” (Bessie Coleman, n. d. para. 10.)

Coleman, continued to travel the country impressing audiences with her dangerous stunts thrilling crowds “ with her dives, figure eights, and loop-the-loops, lived by the motto: No Uncle Tom stuff for me” (This Week in Black History, 2007, para. 1). Bessie refused to perform her stunts for all-white or segregated crowds (Creasman, 1997).

Soon after an exhibition in Chicago, Bessie was in the middle of a “ political controversy” which nearly put an end to her career (Smith, n. d. para. 14). Coleman was offered a part in a film, which she accepted with hopes the publicity would help her career and provide extra money to establish her flying school. However, when Bessie learned the role was to play an “ ignorant black country girl” (Bessie Coleman, n. d. para. 8), she refused the role. This decision cost Bessie and some men in black entertainment rejected Bessie claiming she was “ temperamental and eccentric” (Smith, n. d. para. 15).

After taking a job with a promotional company Bessie purchased her first plane which was outdated and nicknamed it “ Jenny”(Gurasich, 1996). During a exhibition flight the motor stalled and the plane crashed which left Coleman badly injured and the plane destroyed. Bessie spent several months in the hospital but was determined to fly again (Gurasich, 1996).

Bessie took to the skies again after recovering performing in more exhibitions. In early 1926 Coleman opened a beauty shop in Florida to earn extra money to open up a aviation school. At this same time Bessie

purchased another plane, which was again named " Jenny." Arrangements were made for the plane to arrive for a performance slated for May 1, 1926, in Jacksonville, Florida. On the way to Jacksonville, the " mechanic-pilot" had to make three emergency landings (Bessie Coleman, n. d.).

On the eve of the exhibition Bessie and her " mechanic-pilot" decided to take the plane for a practice run. During the flight the plane controls jammed and Bessie Coleman was " thrown two thousand feet at 110 miles per hour to her death" (Creasman, 1997, para. 8). Bessie " was not wearing a parachute or a seatbelt" (Creasman, 1997, para. 9), which caused rumors and speculation. Bessies' mechanic a white man was also killed (Creasman, 1997). In addition, controversy existed regarding Colemans death. Bessie had made enemies along the way, refusing to fly for shows racially segregated which made many individuals angry. Reports indicated the crash was caused by a loose wrench sliding into the controls jamming a mechanism. Many individuals believe the wrench was left purposely (Barnes, 1996).

Bessie did inspire others to become pilots including her nephew Arthur Freeman which grew up to become a pilot. Arthur was only eight when he attended one of Bessies exhibitions, and knew then he too could become a aviator (Barnes, 1996).

In conclusion Bessie did not let obstacles of being poor, black and female determine her future." Bessie Coleman in life was a challenge to the status quo-a constant struggle against the myriad of limitations conventional society erected against anyone who dared to be different" (Rich, 1993, para. 29). " Bessie was ahead of her time as an aviator and as an advocate of

equal rights for African American women”(Rich, 1993, para. 22). Bessie opened the doors allowing endless possibilities regardless of race, or gender.

Since Colemans death various foundations were formed in her honor, which include

the “ Bessie Coleman Aviatrix Charity created in 1928, and the Bessie Coleman Aviators formed in 1975” (Bessie Coleman, n. d. para. 10). In addition the United States Postal Service commemorated her with a stamp in her honor. Each year in honor of her death, pilots from around the world “ fly over her grave and drop bouquets of flowers to show their appreciation” (Bessie Coleman, n. d. para. 11). Bessies’ legacy is honored at “ Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum, “ Black Wings: The American Black in Aviation,” and on a plaque in the International Forest of Friendship in Atchinson, Kansas, which commemorates pilots around the world” (Bessie Coleman, n. d. para. 12). In 1992 Chicago declared May 2, Bessie Coleman day, and in 2000 Bessie was inducted in the Texas Aviation Hall of Fame.

Bessie did not get to fulfill her dream of establishing a aviation school for blacks, but “ in 1929, Lt. William J. Powell founded the Bessie Coleman Aero Club” (Bessie Coleman, n. d. para. 11), in Colemans honor.