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Just 17 years after the Wright Brothers flew at Kitty Hawk, a 28-year-old Chicago woman became the first African American in the world to earn a pilots license. Her name was Bessie Coleman.

Bessie Coleman grew up in the cotton fields of Texas, and moved to Chicago in 1915, at age 23. She was a manicurist at a barber shop until her brother, a veteran of World War One, made a teasing, drunken challenge to her to emulate the women in France who were flying airplanes. Bessie quickly discovered that no American flight school would accept her – not because she was female, but because she was black. Not willing to give up her dream, she enlisted the help of *Chicago Defender* publisher Robert Abbott and, with his help, went to France to learn to fly.

Ambitious, flamboyant and attractive, Bessie Coleman was primarily a stunt pilot, flying exhibitions all over the U.S. while maintaining her home in Chicago. Then, in 1926, during a scouting flight for an exhibition, Bessie Coleman fell from her plane and was killed. The 75th anniversary of her death was commemorated on April 30th, 2001.

Memories of Bessie Coleman

My name is Marion Coleman. I'm a niece of Bessie Coleman. My grandmother had thirteen kids and I think Aunt Bessie was the sixth kid that she had. She had a big crowd there.

When Aunt Bessie left Texas and came to Chicago, she went to school to learn how to manicure and everything.

When her brother came back from the first World War, he was a little drunk, and so he would always come by there and tease her. She'd be in the window, you know, doing people's nails, mostly men, because most of the time, men went to those places. And so he was always teasing her. He'd say, "You are always in there fumbling with nails and things. Those women in France fly airplanes." And every day he'd come by there and he'd wave his hands at her like he was flying. And so she told my grandmother, "You'd better stop your son from coming by the barber shop bothering me, because one day I'm gonna knock him in the head. But every time he'd get drunk, he would make it his business to tease her. He'd do that to her, see, because she always wanted to be big. He said she always wanted to be the big shot. And so he would tease her all the time, just kept on, just kept on.

And so it was that two black men in Chicago, one on the *Defender*, told her that if she wanted to go that bad, they would help her. She had to go take some

languages. She had to learn Spanish and French before she could ever get on a plane to go anyplace. And so that's what she would do. When she'd leave work, she'd go to school to learn how to speak French and Spanish.

Pretty soon, she got to where she'd learned to talk pretty good. And so they gave her the money to go to France. She wanted to go to school that bad. And she stayed over there a long time. I think I was ten years old when she went. When she come back, she could fly. But she didn't have anything to fly of her own, so she'd get in those shows, and they would go out to different places where folks would get in a plane with the people that could fly the airplane and she had learned to fly.

And so she did a lot of flying around, because in those days, they had exhibitions and people would go out to big places to see them fly. And she worked herself right on up to the top. But she did fall once before, in California. She was in the bed for about six months, but she was sick for a year. She broke her left leg. And so after she got up, my grandmother said, "Well, I guess this is enough for her. I guess she'll come on back home now and go to church with me and everything." She looked up again and Aunt Bessie was gone. Gone back to school down in California. So that's where she then finished up learning to fly.

She came back here and did quite a few exhibitions, but she was in Florida when she fell. She was in a big exhibition and her pilot was from France. It seemed that something happened to the plane or else he lost control, because she was going to do this stunt. She was going to jump out of the plane. And so during that time, he must have lost control. Anyway, that plane flipped over and she wasn't buckled in, so she fell. She fell out, I think, at 3,000 some points. And when she hit the ground, you know, she was dead, but he burned up in the plane because he hit a tree. But we were lucky that she fell out because she wouldn't have never made it if she had been flying a plane. So that was the short part, but she did a whole lot of going. She's been everywhere. She's been all around.

One time, she'd wanted my mother to jump out of the plane with a parachute on. And so my mother and her had a fight. And so my grandmother said, "What in the world is going on?" She said, "You'd better talk to your daughter, because I'm not jumping out of no damn plane." And she'd say, "Well, you don't have the courage." She'd say, "Well, I'm not jumping out of the airplane, Mama. You better talk to her." And so they had a big argument, but she didn't go. She didn't jump. So another lady came and did the jumping. And my mother said, "I don't even want to talk about it, Bess." She had bought her an outfit, but she said, "I don't care what you have bought, I'm not jumping out of no plane." And I remember. I was ten years old, and they were in there fussing like everything. And I asked my grandmother, I said, "What are they fussing about?" She said, "Nothing, because Georgia ain't gonna jump out of that airplane!" My mother's name was Georgia.

We kids couldn't go to Aunt Bessie's funeral. It was too big. The church down the street was the biggest church we ever had, down at 33rd and Indiana. It's still down there. And you couldn't get in. It was just like a show, you know. What was good, the Masons in Florida buried Aunt Bessie. And when you go there, you'll see that big thing up there on her grave. It's a beautiful thing.

But she couldn't be buried in her uniform, which was what she wanted. She didn't have another uniform that they could find in Florida to bring her back in. They buried her in a white dress because they couldn't find none of the stuff in Florida. See, all of it was left in different places where she stayed for different flights and things like that. But the uniform, the one she got killed in, was completely messed up and they couldn't find her clothes because the people where she was staying wouldn't didn't tell them nothing. So they buried her in a white dress.

It was an old plane, and it wasn't very good. Those planes that they got for acrobats and things, they weren't no good, you know?

People really don't know it, but Aunt Bessie was married once. She married Mr. Livingston. And he always came by the house when Aunt Bessie was in France to

see about me and my granny, to see if she needed anything, and to see that I got off to school all right.

They realized that they weren't going to be together, so they were good friends. He had him, I guess, another woman, another wife or whatever, but they were just good friends.

Granny could tell you if something happened to her kids. She could always do that. She could do it about Aunt Bessie and she could do it about my mother. She could do it about her two sons that were here. And she just knew that things weren't right, and when they weren't right, you can believe she was going to tell you. So whatever she told you, she knew about it like in a dream or something. She knew. When Aunt Bessie first fell, I'll never forget that, because we were sleeping in the same bed, and that night she got up and she said, "Something has happened to Bessie." And I say, "What are you talking about?" She said, "I said, go back to sleep. I just got to sit here awhile because I got to pray because something has happened to her." That's when she first broke her leg when she went to California. And when she got the message that Aunt Bessie had been killed and fell and died and everything, she just did like always, she got up and sat down and she prayed. "I know it's time for her to go, oh Lord, but you know I love her. I hate to see her leave."

In those days, we didn't have any black doing anything on any airplane, not even riding. I don't think you could ride an airplane in those days, I mean, unless they wanted you to, But an average black person didn't want to ride in an airplane, you know? No, they really didn't. It didn't phase them at all. Only thing that really made them think Bessie was great is because she was black and she was driving. And so that made more blacks want to fly.

Most things that we did in those times was first for us, you know, because we didn't think about nobody, no woman driving no airplane, especially no black one. Aunt Bessie was the first. She was the first, and who would think that she wanted to be that? I mean, that's what bothered my grandma is, "Who wants to be flying up in the air," you know? "I've got to pray for you when I go to church. Because you don't know what you're doing, no way!" (Laughs)

My grandma would say, "Yeah, out of all these children, one is nuts. Crazy as a loon." That was the way she talked to us. "You're just as crazy as a loon. And I sent you all to school and you still get crazy as a loon."

--Excerpted from an interview for *Chicago Stories: Bessie Coleman: Pilot Pioneer*

Links of Interest

Bessie Coleman 1892-1926

Includes information about an Atlanta street named in Coleman's honor, Coleman's induction to the Texas Aviation Hall of Fame, and more.

The Legacy of Bessie Coleman
In-depth article from the Federal Aviation Administration.

The Bessie Coleman Commemorative Stamp

The American Experience: "Fly Girls"
Biographical sketch and portrait from PBS.

For Further Reading

About Bessie

Queen Bess: Daredevil Aviator by Doris L. Rich. Smithsonian Institution Press,

Washington, D.C., 1993.

Bessie Coleman: The Brownskin Lady Bird by Elizabeth A.H. Freyberg. Garland Publishing, New York, 1994.

Children's books about Bessie

Nobody Owns the Sky: The Story of "Brave Bess" Coleman by Reeve Lindbergh. Candlewick Press, Cambridge, MA, 1998.

Fly High! The Story of Bessie Coleman by Louise Borden and Mary Kay Kroeger. Margaret McElderry, 2001.

Juvenile books about Bessie

Brave Bessie—Flying Free by Lillian M. Fisher. Hendrick-Long Publishing Co., Dallas, TX, 1995.

Up in the Air: The Story of Bessie Coleman by Philip S. Hart. Carolrhoda Books, 1996.

Black aviators in general

Black Wings: The American Black in Aviation by Von Hardesty and Dominick Pisano. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 1988.

Flying Free: America's First Black Aviators by Philip S. Hart, Lerner Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 1996.

The Bessie Coleman Foundation

BCF, Inc. is a non-profit corporation whose mission is to continue the legacy of Bessie Coleman by:

1. Educating the country about the contributions of this "Great American Hero."
2. Encouraging young men and women interested in aviation.
3. Assisting individuals in gaining access to available resources for advancement in the industry.
4. Preparing aviation enthusiasts for challenges they will encounter in the aviation industry.
5. Honoring and celebrating the achievements of African Americans in the aviation industry.

The Foundation publishes a newsletter.

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