

Book Review – Amazing Women (part 2)

Review by Chris Hope, Master CFI

Last month I introduced readers of this column to two amazing women of the 1920's and '30's. Beryl Markham, raised in Kenya, discovered flying in the 1920's when she was already well established as one of east Africa's pre-eminent race horse trainers. After successfully delivering by air everything imaginable in a land of no roads and no maps, she became the first person to cross the Atlantic Ocean against the winds, from east to west. She wrote of her experiences in **West with the Night**, first published in 1940. Her full life was documented in 1986 by Mary Lovell, in **Straight on till Morning**.

Bessie Coleman's story is both similar and totally opposite. In **Queen Bess, Daredevil Aviator**, Doris Rich tells of a young woman who seemed to have none of Beryl's financial advantages, but whose ambition was every bit as strong.

Bessie Coleman was born in Atlanta Texas in 1892, and grew up picking cotton as did all of the members of the black community. In fact, when the cotton was ready for picking, schools were closed and black kids and adults headed for the fields. But Bessie was bright and ambitious, and she knew that she did not want to live in the world of Jim Crow laws, in a world where the Ku Klux Klan reigned supreme. So as soon as she could old enough to travel on her own, she made her way to Chicago,

where a vibrant black community existed on its own terms.

"The Great War" was over, and there were many young men traveling the country, barnstorming and Bessie dreamed that she could be part of that. Two problems – she was black, and she was a woman.

It became apparent fairly early that there was no flying school in the United States that was willing to teach a black woman to fly. But, she learned of a school in France that was willing to do so. France, at that time, was enthralled with aviation, and black aviators were as welcome as white. She did need to learn the French language, however, and the cost of travel added significantly to her cost. And when she arrived in France, she learned that the school that had agreed to teach her had a change of heart. But no worry – there was another school just nine miles away, and a person could walk that in a couple of hours. So she did. And the completion of her training led to her becoming the first black woman to receive a pilot's license from the Federation Aeronautic Internationale (FAI).

But Doris Rich points out that this is only the beginning. Because Bessie's dream was not merely to become the first black woman to fly. Her dream was to pass that passion on to other members of her race. Her dream was to raise enough money from her flying exhibitions to

open a school for fliers, black and white. This was not to be. On April 30, 1926, Bessie was preparing for an exhibition in Jacksonville Florida. Because she could not easily see over the side of her aircraft with her seatbelt on, she was not wearing one. A loose wrench jammed the flight controls, the aircraft rolled, and she fell to her death.

Doris Rich's account of Bessie's life is moving and inspiring. Even today, nearly 90 years after her death, it is important to remember what is possible if we have a dream and choose to follow it. **Queen Bess** is the story of a remarkable woman, and well worth your time.

What's on your book shelf?

*Chris loves to read, write, and fly, but not necessarily in that order
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