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TOPICAL FEATURED

Discarded tribute rekindles memories of aviation pioneer

Plaque commemorating former Terre Haute woman discovered in Georgia scrap yard

By Mark Bennett/Tribune-Star Sep 29, 2019

1 of 9



Courtesy Vigo County Historical Museum
Pioneer: After becoming the world's first airline stewardess in 1930, Ellen Church (Marshall) earned a bachelor's degree in nursing, served in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps during World War II and later became director of nursing and administrator at Union Hospital in Terre Haute. This portrait hangs in the Vigo County Historical Museum Historic Impressions Gallery.

Copper bas-relief plaques, sculpted by famous international artists, don't often end up in rural Georgia scrap yards.



Brandon Taylor knew he and his coworkers at Priest Recycle Center in Jasper, Ga., had uncovered something unusual earlier this month. They found a solid copper plaque, with a woman's image at the top and wording below. Its heading read, "Ellen Church Marshall, World's First Airline Stewardess, 1904-1965," followed by a detailed biography.

The signature etched into the bottom left corner read, "Rene Shapshak, '66."

"It was just stuck away in a dark corner. We were just moving stuff around and came across it," said Taylor, the business's yard foreman.

The plaque apparently was traded to the scrap yard about a decade ago for the metal's market value. "A piece of copper that paid 60 or 70 bucks," as Taylor put it. Instead, someone at the business noticed the art piece wasn't normal scrap-yard material and preserved it. The plaque remained in a storage area until Taylor and others rediscovered it.

"It was like, 'Whoa, this might be important to somebody,'" Taylor said. "To us, it's really just scrap value, but to somebody, it's something significant."

Marshall indeed lived a significant life, as attested by historians in the Midwestern towns where she was born and died.

Taylor quickly found that out, too. He not only read Marshall's plaque biography, but researched her life online. There's much to discover. Marshall etched her name into airline history on May 15, 1930, when she served as a United Airlines stewardess aboard a 20-hour flight from San Francisco to Chicago. Marshall, a registered nurse from Cresco, Iowa, persuaded an airline executive to creating that job to care for passengers who often felt ill in the then-unpressurized plane cabins. The airline had already turned her down as a pilot.

An occupation was born. The culture of air travel was transformed for generations ahead.

"She talked them into that. She started the industry," said Norma Shaw, a retired nurse and historian for Union Hospital, where Marshall later served as nursing director and administrator.

Indeed, Marshall left her stewardess career in 1931, thanks to an ankle injury and a desire to further her nursing education at the University of Minnesota. She served in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps during World War II, and moved to Terre Haute around 1950 for the nursing director's job at Union Hospital. Marshall filled that role, and that of administrator, until 1964.

On Aug. 22, 1965 — just a year after marrying, for the first time — Marshall died in a fall while

horseback riding on the Weston Paper mill property near the Wabash River banks. She was buried in Terre Haute's Highland Lawn Cemetery.

Given her groundbreaking airline career, United Airlines commissioned Paris-born artist Rene Shapshak to sculpt commemorative plaques in Marshall's honor. United placed the plaques in airports and stewardess training centers around the world.

It's unknown where the plaque found in Georgia once hung.

After the scrap yard crew spotted it this fall, Taylor contacted the Tribune-Star to spread word of its discovery, hoping to find descendants or a group wanting to display it. Marshall married at age 60 to Terre Haute banker and lawyer Leonard Marshall, and she had no children. Neither did her only sibling, her brother Frank Church, who ran an electronics store in Cresco.

Historical groups in both Cresco and Terre Haute are quite interested in Marshall's legacy.

Her portrait hangs in the Historic Impressions Gallery at the Vigo County Historical Museum. The photograph was taken during Marshall's years at Union Hospital. Her ascension to administrator, the hospital's top executive position, as a woman in the early 1950s "was a big deal," said Susan Tingley, development director for the Historical Museum.

Also, a plaque resembling the one found in Georgia is on display at Union Hospital, near its gift shop and cafeteria.

In Cresco, the small airport in that Iowa town of 3,776 residents is named Ellen Church Marshall Field. Cresco's welcome sign at the town limits declares its niche as the "Home of the World's First Stewardess." The Howard County Historical Museum features an exhibit of her accomplishments and mementos.

Cresco resident Connie Kepros, a member of the Howard County Historical Society, has been lobbying the U.S. Postal Service to issue a commemorative stamp depicting Marshall. "They're still considering it," Kepros said. "It takes a long time."

Folks there remember Ellen as "very petite and quiet," Kepros explained, compared to her brother Frank, "a big, jolly guy." Ellen's reserved nature didn't prevent her from daring to earn a pilot's license in 1929 and then ask Steve Stimpson, manager of Boeing Air Transport (which became United Airlines), for a job as a pilot. He declined Ellen's request, but accepted her subsequent idea to put nurses aboard flights to deal with uneasy passengers. Stimpson's OK led to an inaugural team of eight stewardesses.

Marshall and the others filled a variety of duties. For a salary of \$105 to \$110 a month, they checked the floor bolts to the passengers' seats, scrubbed windows, handled luggage, toted food baskets and coffee Thermoses, and even helped push planes out of hangars, according to Cresco historian Janice Strike.

Pilots who initially resisted the concept quickly reversed their attitudes, because the stewardesses' work eliminated numerous menial tasks.

Marshall's nursing skills paid off on her second flight. A passenger grew ill, and Marshall concluded he had appendicitis, according to Strike's historical recount. Marshall persuaded the pilot to land, after radioing ahead for a doctor and an ambulance. An emergency operation alleviated the passenger's ailment.

"She was a nurse and wanted to make people feel comfortable on a plane," Kepros, the Cresco historian said.

Her place in air travel history wasn't forgotten decades later, when Marshall lived and worked in Terre Haute. While serving as Union Hospital's administrator in 1958, she appeared on CBS Television's popular "To Tell the Truth" show.

Shaw, the Union historian, worked under Marshall's guidance as a nurse. "I saw both sides of her — the tough taskmaster and the warm side," Shaw said.

Marshall lived just a couple doors down North Seventh Street from the hospital, and often walked in late at night — hair in a wrap and wearing a robe — to check on the place. On another occasion, after nurses endured a long night of emergency duty, Marshall came in and cooked them breakfast in the cafeteria, which hadn't yet opened.

"Just an amazing person," Shaw said.

Plaques like the one found in Georgia refer to Marshall as the Florence Nightingale of aviation history. "Humanitarian, war heroine, and aviation pioneer, Ellen Church Marshall dedicated her indomitable spirit to the service of mankind," the plaque reads.

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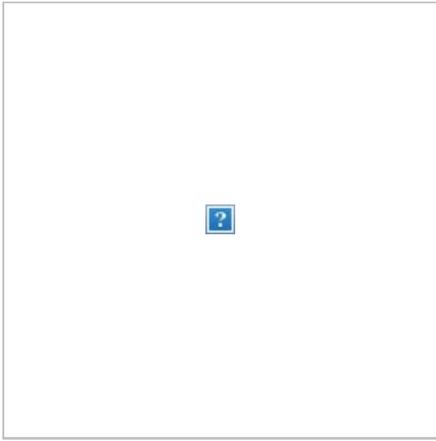
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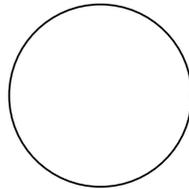


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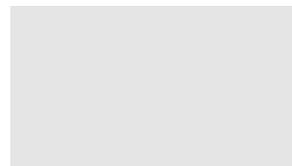
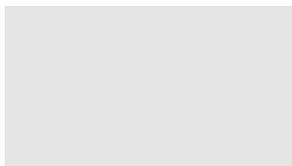
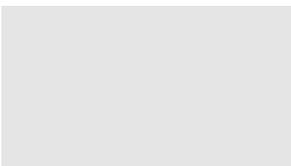
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Mark Bennett has reported and analyzed news from the Wabash Valley and beyond since Larry Bird wore Sycamore blue. That role with the Tribune-Star has taken him from Rome to Alaska and many points in between, but Terre Haute suits him best.

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OBITUARIES



SINDERS, Anna Sep 2, 1936 - Sep 28, 2019

KEAVENEY, Sister Eugene Francis Apr 15, 1926 - Sep 23, 2019

Nidey, Darrell F.

Darrell F. Nidey, 86, of Camby, passed away September 27, 2019. Visitation is Tuesday, October 1, 2019, 5 to 8 p.m., at Carlisle - Branson Funeral Service & Crematory. Burial will take place at Danville National Cemetery.

SAMS, Priscilla Jul 5, 1946 - Sep 25, 2019

MCCULLOUGH, Vickie Sep 21, 1954 - Sep 27, 2019

Redmon, Anthony

passed away on September 22, 2019. He was awarded the Bronze Star during the Vietnam War. Visitation is 10:30-12:30 p.m. with services at 12:30 p.m. on September 28th at North Terre Haute Christian Church, 3133 E. Park.

LANKHAAR, Marian undefined, 1938 - undefined, 2019

ENGLES, Terri Dec 11, 1950 - Sep 25, 2019

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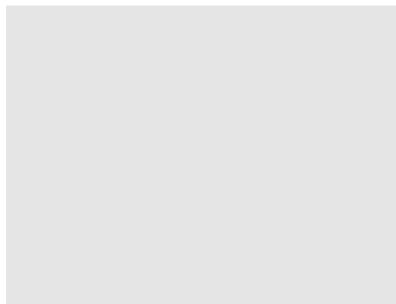
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