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Century of Flight – Part IV

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NOTE: This is the fourth of 10 Ramblin' columns I'm writing from July 5 to Sept. 6 about the first 100 years of flight in Iowa.

By 1930, the names Boeing Air Transport, Midwest Airways, Yellow Cab Airways, Braniff Airlines and Mid-Continent Airline were seen at Iowa's larger airports. And woman began asserting their influence on flight.

Sure, Mary Solbrig had become the chief mechanic, ground crew and business manager for her husband, Oscar, who built his first airplane in 1913 in Davenport. And in 1921 Neta Snook of Ames taught Amelia Earhart to fly. But it was Ellen Church of Cresco who changed the "face" of commercial aviation when on May 15, 1930, she becoming the world's first airline stewardess.

Born in 1904 on a farm near Cresco, Church became a registered nurse and took flying lessons. At age 25 in San Francisco she applied to become a pilot at Boeing Air Transport, which would become United Airlines. While the president refused to hire her, she talked to Steve Stimpson, traffic manager, who liked one of her ideas.

Ellen Church had suggested that nurses be put on commercial flights to make passengers feel more comfortable about flying.



Starting with a guarantee of only a 90-day trial period, Church (back, left in the photo above) trained seven other nurses to become flight attendants and helped design their first uniforms. These stewardesses would be paid \$125 a month for 100 hours of flying to tend to passengers, haul luggage, repair loose seats, fuel airplanes and help pilots push planes into hangars.

With her new career cut short by an automobile accident 18 months later, Church returned to nursing until World War II when she became a captain in the Army Nurse Corps, Air Evacuation Service. For helping thousands of soldiers wounded in battle, she received the Air Medal.

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Church later became administrator at Union Hospital in Terre Haute, Ind., but died shortly after retirement in a horseback riding accident in 1965. The Cresco airport is named "Church Field" in her honor.



In Ames, Neta Snook studied home economics at Iowa State College in 1917, but much preferred courses in mechanical drawing, internal combustion engines and the repair of farm tractors. As a result, she would earn her pilot's license and by 1920 took passengers for rides from the Ames airport in the Canuck airplane she rebuilt.

When winter set in, she shipped the plane to Los Angeles where she became a flying instructor and commercial flyer for Iowa native Bert Kinner. On January 3, 1921, she gave Amelia Earhart her first flying lesson.

Just 2 1/2 years later, after marrying Bill Southern and becoming pregnant, Snook gave up flying for good. But in 1974 she wrote her book, "I Taught Amelia to Fly." She lived until 1991 and the ripe old age of 95.

Earhart, of course, inspired many a young woman to fly, including Ann Holtgren Pellegrino who grew up in Chicago.

"We'd go to Midway Airport," she told me by phone from her home in Texas. "I'd pay my dime to get through the turnstile to watch the planes."

A resident of Iowa from 1969 to 1997, mostly on a farm north of Story City, Pellegrino has written several books that include the trilogy "Iowa Takes to the Air" which serves as a "bible" for Iowa's aviation history. "It was fun," she says, "because I actually talked to 90 percent of the people in the book."

She also became the first woman commissioner on the Iowa Aeronautics Commission and the Iowa Department of Transportation.

She never talked to Earhart, of course, having been born in 1937, the same year Earhart disappeared on her attempt to fly around the world.



But in 1967, thirty years later, Pellegrino and a crew of three flew a Lockheed Electra similar to Earhart's on a 28,000-mile trip around the world, dropping a commemorative wreath on Howland Island near where Earhart is presumed to have gone down.

All three women — Church (2004), Snook (1992), and Pellegrino (1990) — have been inducted into the Iowa Aviation Hall of Fame.

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