

PEOPLE IN AMERICA - Bessie Coleman, 1892-1926: She Dared to Dream and Became the First African American Female Pilot

Written by Vivian Chakarian

VOICE ONE:

I'm Faith Lapidus.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember with People in America in VOA Special English. Today we tell about Bessie Coleman, the first African American woman pilot.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:



Bessie Coleman

Bessie Coleman was born in Atlanta, Texas, in eighteen ninety-two. Her mother was African American. Her father was part African American and part American Indian. Her family was poor. Bessie had to walk more than six kilometers to go

to school. When she was nine years old, her father left the family to search in Oklahoma for the territory of his Indian ancestors.

In Texas then, as in most areas of the American South, black people were treated unfairly. They lived separately from white people and established their own religious, business and social traditions. Bessie was proud of her race. She learned that from her hard-working and religious mother.

VOICE TWO:

Bessie had to pick cotton and wash clothes to help earn money for her family. She was able to save a little money and went to college in the state of Oklahoma. She was in college only one year. She had to leave because she did not have enough money to complete her studies. But during that year, she learned about flying. She read about the first flight of the Wright Brothers and the first American female pilot, Harriet Quimby. Bessie often thought about what it would feel like to fly like a bird.

VOICE ONE:

When she was twenty-three, Bessie Coleman moved to Chicago, Illinois to live with two of her older brothers. There, she worked at several jobs. But she wanted to do something more important. She heard stories from pilots who were returning from World War One. She decided she was going to learn how to fly airplanes. She soon found this to be almost impossible. What flight school would admit a black woman?

She found that apparently there were none in the United States. Bessie learned that she would have a better chance in Europe. She began to study French at a language school in Chicago. She also took a higher-paying job supervising a public eating place so she could save money.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Soon after the end of World War One, Bessie Coleman left for France. She attended the famous flight school, Ecole d'Aviation des Freres Caudron, in the town of Le Crotoy in northern France. She learned to fly in a plane that had two sets of wings, one over the other. She completed seven months of flight training. Coleman earned her international permit to fly in nineteen twenty-one from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale in France. She became the first black woman ever to earn an international pilot's license.

VOICE ONE:

Coleman returned to Chicago. She was the only black female pilot in the United States. So her story became popular in African American newspapers. She was asked by the Dallas Express newspaper in Texas why she wanted to fly. She said that women and blacks must have pilots if they are to keep up with the times. She added: "Do you know you have never lived until you have flown. "

Coleman soon learned that it was difficult for anyone to earn enough money as a pilot to live. She knew she would have to improve her flying skills and learn to do more tricks in the air if she wanted to succeed. There still was no one willing to teach her in Chicago. So, she returned to Europe in nineteen twenty-two. She completed about four more months of flight training with French and German pilots.

VOICE TWO:

Coleman returned to New York where she gave her first public flying performance in the United States. A large crowd of people gathered to watch her. She rolled the plane. And she stopped the engine and then started it again just before the plane landed. The crowd loved her performance. So did other crowds as she performed in towns and cities across the country.

Bessie Coleman had proved she could fly. Yet she wanted to do more. She hoped to establish a school for black pilots in the United States. She knew she needed a plane of her own. She traveled to Los Angeles, California, where she sought the support of a company that sold tires. The company helped her buy a Curtiss JN-

Four airplane, commonly called a Jenny. In return, she was to represent the company at public events.

VOICE ONE:

Bessie Coleman organized an air show in Los Angeles. But the Jenny's engine stopped soon after take-off, and the plane crashed to the ground. Coleman suffered a broken leg and other injuries. She regretted the accident and felt she had disappointed her supporters. She sent a message: "Tell them all that as soon as I can walk I'm going to fly!"

Coleman returned to Chicago where she continued her plan to open a flying school. She had very little money, no job and no plane, yet she opened an office in Chicago. She soon found it was impossible to keep the office open without more financial support. So she decided to return to flying.

VOICE TWO:

In nineteen twenty-five, Bessie Coleman traveled to her home state of Texas. The former cotton picker and beauty technician now was the only licensed black woman pilot in the world. She could speak French. And she was an international traveler.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

To earn money, Bessie Coleman gave speeches and showed films of her flights. She did this in churches, theaters and at local all-black public schools. She organized more air shows. She soon had enough money to pay for some of the cost of a plane of her own, another old Curtiss Jenny. She continued her speeches and air shows in the state of Georgia, then in Florida. She hoped to earn enough money to open her school.

In Florida, Coleman met Edwin Beeman, whose father was the head of a huge chewing gum company. Mister Beeman gave her the money to make the final

payment on her plane in Dallas. Coleman made plans to have it flown to her in Jacksonville, Florida. A young white pilot, William Wills, made the trip.

But the old Jenny had problems. Wills had to make two stops during the short flight to repair the plane. Local pilots who examined the plane were surprised he had been able to fly it so far.

VOICE TWO:

On April thirtieth, nineteen twenty-six, Coleman was preparing for an air show in which she would star. She agreed to make the flight with William Wills. He flew the plane so she could clearly see the field she would fly over.

She did not use any safety devices, such as a seat belt or parachute. They would have prevented her from leaning over to see all of the field. During the flight, the plane's controls became stuck. The plane turned over in the air. Nothing was holding Coleman in. She fell more than a kilometer to her death. Wills had worn a seat belt. But he also died when the plane crashed.

Officials later found the cause of the accident. A tool had slid into the controls of the plane. Experts said that the accident would not have happened if Wills and Coleman had been flying a newer and safer plane.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Throughout her life, Bessie Coleman had resisted society's restrictions against blacks and women. She believed that the air is the only place where everyone is free. She wanted to teach other black people about that special environment.

It took some time until her wish was fulfilled. It was not until nineteen thirty-nine that black students were permitted to enter civilian flight schools in the United States.

It was not until the Second World War that black male pilots were sent into battle. And, it was not until nineteen eighty that the first black women completed military pilot training in the United States.

VOICE TWO:

Bessie Coleman did not live to establish her own flying school. But she had said that if she could create the minimum of her plans and desires, she would have no regrets. She had accepted the dangers of her job because she loved flying.

Her influence continues today. In nineteen ninety-two, the Chicago City Council passed a resolution praising her. It said: "Bessie Coleman continues to inspire untold thousands, even millions of young persons with her sense of adventure, her positive attitude and her determination to succeed. " In nineteen thirty-four, Lieutenant William Powell wrote a book called "Black Wings." He wrote: "Because of Bessie Coleman, we have overcome that which was much worse than racial barriers. We have overcome the barriers within ourselves and dared to dream. "

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VOICE ONE:

This program was written by Vivian Chakarian. It was produced by Lawan Davis. I'm Faith Lapidus.