

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

The Amazing “Pancho” Barnes

Originally appeared July 19, 2021

KEY WORDS: Thaddeus Lowe Civil War Ballooning Pancho Barnes Chuck Yeager
The Happy Bottom Riding Club Edwards Air Force Base

This week and last had the anniversaries of a large number of “first” events of note, including: the first powered and human-powered aerial crossings of the English Channel, the first Black and first woman general officers in the U.S. Air Force, the first launch at Cape Canaveral, the first fly-by of Mars and Pluto, the first solo aerial circumnavigation, the first robotic landing on Mars, the first Landsat mission, and of course, the first manned landing on the Moon. There were many others, and cumulatively they span a considerable portion of aviation and Space exploration history.

The subject of this week’s Item is an amazing character whose life, and that of her family, span the arc of aviation history, from the Civil War to Apollo 11 and beyond.

THADDEUS LOWE

The morning of June 18, 1861 dawned like so many summer days in the District of Columbia – hot and humid. Thaddeus Lowe awoke with excitement. He was a self-taught scientist and inventor, and had spent the last ten years focused on meteorological science and hydrogen ballooning, and had big dreams about the potential scientific, military, and commercial value ballooning would likely soon enjoy. Like some aviation innovators of today, he was adept at public relations and self-promotion.

Then the U.S. Civil War broke out.

Lowe was well-known enough, and ballooning was interesting enough, to attract attention from high-level policy-makers, including President Lincoln. The President was intrigued by Lowe’s ideas on using balloons as an aerial observation platform to see troop movements and spot for artillery, and agreed to have Lowe give him a demonstration, asking the War Department to provide \$250 to cover Lowe’s costs.

This was the morning Lowe had waited for. He would launch his balloon from just outside the Columbia Armory, long gone now but it once stood on the ground very near the present site of the Mall building of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. Two other men accompanied him, American Telegraph Company’s George McDowell and telegrapher Hebert Robinson. Lowe would have a telegraph key in the balloon’s gondola, linked by wire to the ground and then to both the White House and a telegraph office in Alexandria, which would repeat his message from on high rather broadly.

His message, and the manner in which it went to decision-makers, was very effective.

Lowe took his tethered balloon to 500 feet, and had Robinson key out, “This point of observation commands an area nearly fifty miles in diameter. The city, with its girdle of encampments, presents a superb scene. I take great pleasure in sending you this first dispatch ever telegraphed from an aerial station, and in acknowledging my indebtedness to your encouragement for the opportunity of demonstrating the availability of the science of aeronautics in the military service of this country.”

He might have laid it on a bit thick, but it worked. He was named the “Chief Aeronaut of the Union Army” and given funds sufficient to build seven balloons, twelve hydrogen generators, and a barge to move them around – the U.S. military’s first “aircraft carrier!” His balloons were the first aerial unit of the U.S. Army.

Lowe demonstrated the value of airborne reconnaissance many times in the two years that followed, helping military cartographers, reconnaissance experts, and informing tactical operations. However, the value of ballooning and the worth of Lowe’s efforts were slow to be recognized, and he parted company with the Army in 1863.

Lowe was already a leading expert in the production of hydrogen. Then he made a significant advancement with the discovery of the “water gas process,” where he could recover large amounts of hydrogen from steam and charcoal. His technological research also led to advances in refrigeration. Both developments made him very rich, and he built a huge mansion in Pasadena. The size of his house was somewhat needed; he would have ten children, three boys and seven girls.

His seventh child, and second son, was named Thaddeus Lowe Jr. (some sources say Thaddeus Lowe II). The younger Thaddeus and his wife had a daughter, Florence Leontine Lowe, on ***July 22, 1901, 120 years ago this week.***

“PANCHO” the AIR RACING BARNSTORMER

Young Florence was born to wealth, but she most definitely did not conform to the standards expected of her in that day and age. She attended the finest private schools available, but also spent a lot of time in the “great outdoors” with her father, an avid sportsman. She would become unusually good with horses, too.

But things really changed for Florence when her famous grandfather took her to an air show when she was 10 years old. The changes did not fully make their presence known immediately, but....

Thaddeus Jr.’s wife really put pressure on her daughter to start acting like the little rich girl she was. She married at 18 to C. Rankin Barnes, a prominent Episcopalian priest and had a son the next year. Maybe she’d forget about being outdoors.

Her father died young, and her mother passed in 1924, leaving young Florence Barnes with a lot of money. She could no longer tolerate the quiet and reserved life of a priest’s wife, so she went traveling.

She had a number of adventures, but topped them in 1928 when she disguised herself as a man, joined the crew of a banana boat, and jumped ship down Mexico way with another of the crew. They explored the countryside, and her companion got to calling her “Pancho,” envisioning himself as Don Quixote and forgetting that his squire was named Sancho Panza, not Pancho. But Florence fancied the mash-up name, which was good, because it stuck.

She returned home, and, recalling the good times with granddad 18 years earlier, took up flying. She was a natural pilot, but a bit wild; she loved buzzing her husband’s church during services!

She bought herself a Travel Air biplane, a top craft at that time. She became a master of its controls, and started flying like other famous barnstormers of the era. She and a young parachutist she met toured the countryside with an air show they called the “Pancho Barnes Flying Mystery School.” Pancho would fly some spectacular aerobatics, then the climax of the show would involve a young woman selected randomly from the audience being taken aloft, given a parachute, and then being shoved out of the plane. Nobody ever sued, and fortunately, nobody got hurt, but the audacity of the show made Pancho quite famous.

Tossing unsuspecting women out of her plane apparently wasn’t exciting enough for Pancho, so she upgraded her Travel Air biplane to Travel Air’s Model R, aka the “Mystery Ship,” one of the hottest things in the sky, and began air racing. She became quite adept at high-speed flight, won some races, and set some flight records, including one held by Amelia Earhart. Since she lived near Hollywood, it was a natural thing for her to start flying for the movies, and she was in a number of films in the early 1930s. She was both a stunt flyer and an aerial advisor, and would become a principal creator of a labor union stunt pilots.

Old Thaddeus’ granddaughter was as colorful as he. Pancho was very good at flying, adventuring, and promotion, but she was lousy at money management (also much like her grandfather). Her financial situation became particularly acute during the Depression. She took her remaining funds and bought some ranchland in the middle of the Mojave Desert in 1935, not far from the Army Air Corps’ March Field, and began ranching.

THE HAPPY BOTTOM RIDING CLUB

The AAC became a steady customer for meat and dairy products from Pancho’s place. She realized that pilots in the middle of the desert, far from home and living a dangerous lifestyle would need a place to relax, ideally away from the brass. She opened a restaurant, bar, and coffee house, and later a dance hall, motel, a horse stable, and even a swimming pool (in the middle of the desert!). She brought in musical talent for the dance hall (and [wrote some of the music](#), too; eight of her songs were recorded, one was played on TV, and she even wrote a million-selling hit, “By Your Side”). And she wasn’t dependent on just the pilots from March, she built an airstrip that would attract aviators from far and wide. To avoid hassle from liquor laws, she made her ranch a “private club” for members only in 1947, so the bar could stay open round the clock.

March Field became Muroc Army Air Base, then Edwards Air Force Base, home of the hottest test pilots in the service. They particularly appreciated the watering hole; it seems as pilots,

then astronauts, would find such a place (or make one) wherever they were: other famous examples include the [Outpost Tavern](#) (moved from Ellington Field to outside JSC) and gone-but-not-forgotten Cajun joint, Pe-Te's, outside Ellington. But Pancho's "Happy Bottom Riding Club" eclipsed them all!

[Personal note: I've had the pleasure of visiting the Outpost and Pe-Te's, and I miss them terribly. I still have a card from Pe-Te's in my wallet, and I took my newborn daughter there on the way home from the hospital. Les Johnson got a great big kick out of KLEW's reaction to her first taste of his fantastic BBQ sauce! But I never had a chance to meet Pancho....]

One of the best friends of the HBRC was test pilot and WWII vet, Chuck Yeager. Pancho encouraged his efforts with the X-1, and offered him a big T-bone steak on the house if/when he broke the sound barrier. The offer was extended to any pilot going supersonic for the first time, and proved to be wildly popular. The HBRC not only attracted test pilots, it attracted those who were attracted to test pilots. Pancho welcomed and encouraged lots of single women to join the club, but had very strict rules against "compensated visits" lest the Air Force shut her place down. At its height, the HBRC had 9000 members, many of them the rich, famous, and/or powerful, including a number of (future) astronauts. Notables include: Tony LeVier, Bob Hoover, Jimmy Doolittle, Buzz Aldrin, and more.

The pilots loved Pancho and her place, but the Brass apparently, not so much. The six-year party's days were numbered. Part of the problem was the growth of Edwards AFB in the very early 50s, along with a change in command in 1952. They wanted her property "for expansion of Edwards runways," or at least the closure of her place, and offered to buy her out. The money was not sufficient, so a rumor was started that the HBRC was a cathouse (false!) while negotiations were under way. Chuck Yeager was fond of saying, "The Happy Bottom Riding Club was NOT a cathouse, but it wasn't a church, either!" The Air Force jumped on the rumor, and ordered all personnel to avoid the place, and moved to take it by eminent domain. Barnes sued, and a fire of "undetermined origin" burned down most of her ranch buildings. She got some money, but not what her business was worth, the Air Force got her land, and to this day never used it for runway extension.

It was the end of a colorful era.

PANCHO'S LEGACY

Pancho and her husband moved to Cantil, another small town in the Mojave. She reconciled with the Air Force, and reconnected with Chuck Yeager and others from the good old days. By 1964, she was formally welcomed back to Edwards, which declared her the "First Citizen of Edwards." Her health declined, and she passed away in 1975. But she lived long enough to see some of her friends walk on the Moon.

To this day, "[Pancho Barnes Day](#)," an annual event, is held on the site of the HBRC. It is a community affair, broadly defined, that memorializes the hey-day of jet flight test, and how Pancho was intimately intertwined with it.

Her amazing life has been an inspiration to a lot of young flyers, both female and male. From her grandfather's strong influence on her from the very first days of military air, to her

association with so many pilots and future astronauts, she saw it all and was at the center of much of it! When Bob Hoover compliments your flying ability, you know you are at the top of the “Right Stuff” pyramid!

Don’t miss the CSC link below!

REFERENCES

Thaddeus Lowe

<https://www.nationalballoonmuseum.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Thaddeus-Lowe.pdf>

<http://www.thaddeuslowe.name/CWcabletoLincoln.htm> (source of quoted material)

<http://www.thaddeuslowe.name/LoweFamily.htm>

2011 Event at NASM: <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/mr-lincolns-air-force-top-10-reasons-visit-museum-june-11th>

NASM’s “Civil War Ballooning”: <https://airandspace.si.edu/learn/highlighted-topics-/flight/civil-war-ballooning>

Thaddeus Lowe, Comics Version: <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/almost-true-comics>

“Pancho” the Air Racing Barnstormer and The Happy Bottom Riding Club

I was able to find four archived websites of considerable use in understanding more about Pancho Barnes. One, about her songwriting, was linked to above; the other three are below.

The outstanding “Centennial of Flight” website is hard to find today (alas, it was written in an unpopular and outdated format), but glory be, I found it on web.archive; see: https://web.archive.org/web/20100813201411/http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Explorers_Record_Setters_and_Daredevils/Barnes/EX17.htm

Nick Spark posted *The Story of Pancho Barnes*, now available at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20100626063843/http://www.legendofpanchobarnes.com/film/about-the-film/back-in-the-saddle-the-story-of-pancho-barnes-and-her-happy-bottom-riding-club.html>

This page has a lot of good additional references on Pancho, if you’d like to dig further:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20100706014944/http://www.legendofpanchobarnes.com/film/links.html>

See also: <http://panchobarnes.com>

Pancho and the HBRC were prominently featured in Tom Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff*. If you want to get a feel for what it was like in the go-go days of Edwards and NASA, his book is a great source! The book was published in 1979. The movie version of *The Right Stuff* premiered in 1983. It bombed at the box office, but received 8 Academy Award nominations, won four of them. The

cast contained many, many then-and-future stars. Actress [Kim Stanley](#) portrayed Pancho. Chuck Yeager was played by Sam Shepard. The HBRC's bartender was played by Chuck Yeager. There have been a number of other books and documentaries about this amazing person!

Pancho's Legacy

ATTENTION: ALL NASM DOCENTS and anyone involved in formal/informal aviation education!

If you only consult one of the references about Pancho Barnes, be sure to watch this one, from the Computer Sciences Corporation's 1994 tribute to "the Legacy of Pancho Barnes"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWY0WlgFLf0&ab_channel=SpaceSPAN

Last Edited on 18 July 2021