

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

## HARRIET QUIMBY

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Queen of the Air

*She was the "Queen of the Air" in 1910, a colorful woman aviation pioneer who helped popularize flying and overturn stereotypes in an important time in American history. Her aviation career spanned only 11 months, but her feats and her courage inspired many that followed.*

### HARRIET QUIMBY

Harriet Quimby was born on May 11, 1875, on a small rural farm near Coldwater, Michigan. Once she became famous, several towns near her family's old place would claim her as their own, but very little is known about her early life, apart from her family having a hard time making ends meet. They finally packed up and left in 1887, and went to try farming in California, just south of San Luis Obispo, near present-day Arroyo Grande (an area now famous for its strawberries). Hardscrabble teen years made Harriet decide that farm life wasn't in her future.

Harriet must have picked up a pretty good education along the way. She was smart and beautiful, and wanted to become an actress, but picked up a job as journalist and drama critic for the *San Francisco Bulletin* instead. She was successful, but had aspirations that the *Bulletin* position couldn't fulfill, so she went off to the bright lights of New York City. In no time, she acquired a job as a regular contributor and photographer for ...

### **LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER**

Journalism was really different in the post-Civil War era. Newspapers were king, as there was no such thing as radio, TV, or the Internet, and one particular illustrated newspaper, *Leslie's*, was quite popular at the time. It started in 1855 (some sources say 1852) and survived until 1922, although its name underwent minor changes over that time period. Frank Leslie died in 1880, and the publication was continued by his wife, Miriam Florence Leslie, who was an ardent women's suffrage campaigner. Quimby fit right in, even though she was not a suffragette herself, and many of her stories published there had strong women's rights themes, such as her piece entitled, "Can Women Run Automobiles?" She would become the drama critic for the

publication, and the editor of its women's page. In addition to Quimby's many articles (300+), other contributors to the paper were Louisa May Alcott and Norman Rockwell.

Quimby cut a wide swath through New York society. She drove a big yellow automobile (a great rarity, especially for a woman of the time), and encouraged women to follow all the pursuits men followed. She wrote a number of screenplays for D.W. Griffiths in the early days of motion pictures. Between *Leslie's* and Hollywood, she was quite famous long before she took up flying.

We know that an article or articles in *Leslie's* in 1910 was at least in part the reason for Harriet's interest in flight. Perhaps it was the [edition of December 1](#) that year, which had a picture of women in an airplane on its cover and an article about Eugene Ely's flight off the *USS Birmingham*.

The [December 30, 1909, issue](#) might have been involved, too. Its cover illustration was of a woman piloting a Wright-type airplane, and a retrospective piece about 1909 that included Wilbur Wright demonstrating the commercial value of the airplane and Louis Bleriot's flight across the English Channel!

More likely her motivation to fly was inspired by the earlier [September 29 edition](#), which had an airship-themed cover and was almost entirely devoted to aviation, containing an interview with Glenn Hammond Curtiss, a prediction: "The Launching of an Aerial Man-of-War in 2010" (envisioned as a combination of "the balloon and the biplane, anticipating the aircraft-carrying zeppelins of the 1930s)," an article entitled, "How Man Has Grown His Wings (OK, the gender thing was still an issue), an article entitled, "How We Shall Fly in 2020," a piece entitled, "The Feminine Experiment with White Wings" (about the wives of Curtiss, Ely, and other male aviation pioneers; ditto about the gender thing), and a poem entitled, "The Aeroplane Girl" (see below).

[BTW, baseball fans, the *Sporting Gossip* column in the 9/29/1910 issue has a piece about "Major league ballplayers drawing up a "bill of rights" to present to the powers of organized baseball at their next meeting, including a clause that would declare players to be "free agents" after (their contract expired)." Calling the future Curt Flood...!]

*The Aeroplane Girl*, was published on page 337 in the September 29, 1910, issue of *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* (no author listed):

"She has stolen the blue of the clear summer skies, and the light of the stars for her beautiful eyes; And dressed in brown leather, in clear sunny weather, through infinite space, she circles the skies. She has tucked out of sight every ribbon and curl, with smile all a-dazzle of ruby and pearl; she races to swallow, and dares us to follow, the fearless and frolicsome Aeroplane Girl."

*The Aeroplane Girl* was printed at the end of Quimby's *Through the Opera Glass* review column. I would wager heavily that she was the poem's author. Regardless of authorship, I have to believe that she thought the poem was about her. In any case, she resolved to become the Aeroplane Girl!

## HARRIET TAKES FLIGHT

Flying was on the minds of the public since Kitty Hawk, but interest really peaked when everyday folks had a chance to actually see an airplane in flight. An [air show](#) of any kind was wildly popular, both for the novelty, and danger, of flight. The first such held in the U.S. was near Los Angeles in January, 1910. It included racing and contests of various sorts, with serious prize money. *Hundreds of thousands* of people saw all or part of the show. Popular indeed! Another big show was held in September, 1910, the Harvard-Boston Aero Meet. The Wright Brothers and Glenn Curtiss were there, and \$90,000 in prizes were on the line. Popularity ensued.

The Belmont Park International Aviation Association held a tournament on Long Island a month later. Harriet had been intrigued in aviation by the popularity of the Harvard-Boston affair and the aviation issue of *Leslie's* that month, so she went.

And was smitten.

At the BPIAA tournament, Harriet met John Moisant and his sister, Mathilde. They were familiar with Harriet from her work at *Leslie's*, and Harriet and Mathilde really hit it off. John was a well-known pilot, and with his brother, Alfred, operated a flight school on Long Island. Both women wanted to learn to fly; how could the brothers say no?

The notion that a woman was learning to fly, especially one with the celebrity that Harriet had earned, was Big News, and Harriet wasted no time in capitalizing on it. She chronicled her experiences leaning to fly in a series of articles in *Leslie's*. Woman (and men) all over America lived vicariously in her published descriptions. On August 1, 1912, she became the first American woman to receive an official pilot's license. Mathilde soon became the second.

Harriet began flying in earnest, including a performance in front of 15,000 on Staten Island in September, and became the first woman to fly at night. She and Mathilde joined the Moisant International Aviators Exhibition Team and began barnstorming. Harriet's already high visibility was enhanced by her distinctively-tailored purple flight suit and accessories. She began getting billed as "The Queen of the Air."

Her growing fame, good looks, and especially her purple aviation togs attracted the attention of the company that made "Vin Fiz" grape soda. They had already sponsored an airplane, named the "Vin Fiz" and adorned with a painting for purple grapes, built by the Wright Brothers for [Calbraith Perry Rogers](#) to use to [fly cross-country](#) in 1911. *Vin Fiz*, the airplane, is now [in the collection](#) of the National Air and Space Museum. Harriet and her trademark suit were a natural fit for Vin Fiz's marketing efforts, and she became a spokesperson for the company's product. Perhaps the company [should have devoted more money and effort](#) into ensuring Vin Fiz the soda actually tasted good. Word is, it didn't, and the Vin Fiz was never a commercial success. That is, until recently. Maybe. An inventor came up with the idea to make a [board game](#) based on Roger's flight. He even was able to secure the rights to the original logo artwork. A new version of Vin Fiz, was created in 2007. Such was the power of Harriet's fame;

the new bottlers are using a [purple-clad aviatrix](#) on the bottle label... But I haven't seen it on the grocery shelf, have you?

One of the most famous aviation feats up to that time was the first flight across the English Channel, by Louis Bleriot on July 25, 1909, which won him instant fame and the £1,000 prize offered by the *London Daily Mail*. He was in the aircraft manufacturing business, and his Channel crossing sold a lot of airplanes. In the two years that followed, the Channel was flown across a few times. But never by a woman.

I think you can see where this is going.

Harriet left for Europe in March, 1912, with the goal of meeting with Bleriot and then becoming the first woman to fly the Channel. She even bought an airplane from him, a 70 hp state-of-the-art model. She was nervous about the prospects of her making it OK; the planes of the day were slow and rickety, and 22 miles over water is a long way to fly. But she was undaunted and set Tuesday, April 16, 1912, as the Big Day. Big day, maybe; bad choice, definitely.

The day was quite foggy and visibility was poor, but off she went. The engine ran rough at one point, causing some concern, but soon ran smooth again. Harriet had trouble holding course in the fog, and ended up flying farther than planned. She made landfall off Hardelot, France, and was greeted warmly by a crowd of locals when she landed on the beach.

She had hoped that her Channel crossing would generate huge amounts of real-time publicity. But her feat barely made the back pages, if any, of most newspapers around the world. It's not that Harriet's flight wasn't newsworthy. It is just that it was grossly overshadowed by an event the day before, the sinking of *RMS Titanic*.

Harriet Quimby was, indeed, the "Queen of the Air." She came back to the States and continued vigorously her air show flying. In June, she headed to Boston to compete in the Third Annual Boston Aviation Meet in Squantum, Massachusetts, organized by William A.P. Willard and his son Charles, who was also an exhibition pilot. The event was a big success, and father and son flipped a coin to see which one of them would get to take a joyride with Harriet in her Bleriot. Son Charles won. He gladly climbed into the rear seat, and off they went. They flew around Boston Harbor for a while, without incident. When they returned, it was Dad's turn.

## **AND THEN THE END**

Harriet and William flew out over the harbor and circled the Boston Light before heading back to the field, where 5,000 avid spectators awaited. They had been at an altitude of a few thousand feet, and began spiraling downward in preparation for landing on the beach. Suddenly, for a reason(s) never fully determined, the tail abruptly pitched up. Neither Harriet nor Willard was strapped in, and the sudden move flung Willard out of the rear seat and over the nose of the airplane. Harriet almost brought the aircraft back under control, but seriously unbalanced by the loss of Willard's considerable weight aft, the aircraft pitched downward again and Harriet went over the nose, too.

Both Willard and Harriet fell about a thousand feet before landing in three feet of water just off the beach. The uncrewed aircraft volplaned gently onto a muddy bank behind the shoreline, largely undamaged.

Earle Ovington, a famous pilot, air mail pioneer, meet official, and owner of a [rather-odd helmet](#), was first on the scene. Nothing could be done for Quimby or Willard. He examined the airplane and saw that one of the control cables had become tangled in the steering mechanism, which he thought was the clear cause the crash. Another explanation put forward was that Willard had leaned forward to talk with Harriet in flight, and his weight shift was enough to cause control problems, since the Bleriot aircraft was notoriously unstable. Glenn Martin and reporters for the Boston Globe pointed out that neither would have died had they been wearing seat belts. Maybe it was a combination of things; nobody will know for sure. The “Queen of the Air” was dead.

Harriet had one more observation, now seeming to come from beyond the grave. She had written a piece then in the publication pipeline for *Good Housekeeping* magazine just before her last flight. In it, she said, “There is no reason why the aeroplane should not open up a fruitful occupation for women. I see no reason why they cannot realize handsome incomes by carrying passengers between adjacent towns, why they cannot derive incomes from parcel delivery, from taking photographs from above, or from conducting schools for flying. Any of these things it is now possible to do.” The piece was published posthumously.

Harriet Quimby was also an inspiration for a number of young girls of the day. One of them was named Amelia Earhart, but that’s another story.

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Harriet Quimby produced several screenplays early in her career, so she has an entry on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) website: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0703644/bio>

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