

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Katherine Stinson, Pilot, 1891-1977, and Marjorie Stinson, Pilot and Instructor, 1896-1975

The diminutive young woman from Alabama had a goal: to become a piano teacher. But her parents could not afford the training in Europe that Katherine wanted. Looking for a way to make money, she noticed the new field of aviation. Pilots who flew stunts in fragile open-air biplanes earned as much as \$1,000 *a day!*



Katherine Stinson



Marjorie Stinson

Exhilarated after her first ride as a passenger, Katherine prevailed upon an instructor to teach her the controls. With just four hours of instruction, she was flying solo. Katherine proceeded to set a string of records that left the notion of teaching piano far behind.¹

When her instructor relocated to San Antonio and reported ideal flying conditions, Katherine and her family followed him there in 1913. With her mother and sister, Marjorie, she opened the Stinson School of Flying in that city. Marjorie earned her pilot's license on August 12, 1914, at the age of 18 and became flying instructor at the airfield. In 1916, with the war in Europe raging, she trained at least 100 cadets to fly and become known as "The Flying Schoolmarm." The school closed at the end of the war. Marjorie barnstormed the country doing stunt flying at county fairs and airports, then retired from flying in 1928 and became a draftsman for the U.S. Navy's Aeronautical Division.

Katherine Stinson was the first woman pilot to master the loop-the-loop, a stunt considered particularly dangerous. She was the first pilot of either sex to produce night skywriting with fireworks. She performed as far away as China and Japan, where crowds heralded her as the "Air Queen." In 1917 she set a world long-distance record by flying alone 610 miles from San Diego to San Francisco.

Katherine was an excellent mechanic who examined her plane before each flight, carefully cleaning its components. Such diligence contributed to her remarkable safety record: she performed the loop-the-loop over 500 times without an accident.²

When the U.S. entered World War I, Katherine volunteered as a pilot but was turned down because she was a woman. Seeking other ways to help, she raised \$2 million for the Red Cross through air shows and piloted airmail deliveries, the first woman in the U.S. to fill this role. On one such flight, she surpassed her previous endurance record by carrying mail 783 miles nonstop between Chicago and New York City.

Rejected again as a military pilot, Katherine volunteered as an ambulance driver in Europe. She was accepted, but brutal winter and wartime conditions took a toll on her health: she returned to the U.S. weak from tuberculosis. Settling in Santa Fe, she eventually became an award-winning designer of pueblo-style homes. Katherine never flew again, but her pioneering efforts lifted aviation to public awareness and acceptance.

Quotations

When you are flying toward a cloud, it does not seem as if you yourself are moving. The cloud seems to be rushing at you. And when you enter it, you are in the thickest fog you ever imagined. . . . I have been in clouds so dense I couldn't see my own hands operating the controls.³

They said I would ruin the cloth with my scrubbing, and that the oil didn't hurt the wires and joints anyway. . . . But I wanted to see the condition of things under all that dirt. And I did find a good many wires that needed to be replaced.⁴

Fear, as I understand it, is simply due to lack of confidence or lack of knowledge—which is the same thing. You are afraid of what you don't understand, of things you cannot account for.⁵

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It was easy to tell where I was all the time . . . towns, cities, farms, hills and mountains passed rapidly. . . . I never had any fear. The main thing was speed.—Katherine describing her historic flight from San Diego to San Francisco⁶

Photos

#851-G. Caption: “Katherine Stinson, c. 1910.” ITC *San Antonio Light* Collection; ITC #85-163. Caption: “Marjorie Stinson at the controls of a Curtiss Pusher plane, c. 1916.” UT Dallas History of Aviation Collection.

Endnotes

¹ Sources for biographical information in this article are Mary Beth Rogers, Sherry A. Smith, and Janelle D. Scott, *We Can Fly: Stories of Katherine Stinson and Other Gutsy Texas Women* (Austin: Ellen C. Temple, 1983), pp. 11-23, 176; Christine A. Keffeler, “Stinson, Katherine,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/SS/fst97.html> (March 9, 2005); Mary Beth Rogers, Ruthe Winegarten, and Sherry Smith, *Texas Women: A Celebration of History* (Austin: Texas Foundation for Women’s Resources, 1981), pp. 12-13; and Ruthe Winegarten, *Texas Women: A Pictorial History from Indians to Astronauts* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1986), p. 94.

² Accident-free record from Rogers et al., *We Can Fly*, p. 14. Katherine’s record firsts in flying are detailed in that source and in “Stinson, Katherine,” *Handbook of Texas Online*.

³ Quoted in Rogers et al., *We Can Fly*, p. 13.

⁴ Quoted in Rogers et al., *We Can Fly*, pp. 14-15.

⁵ Quoted in Rogers et al., *We Can Fly*, p. 23.

⁶ Quoted in Rogers et al., *We Can Fly*, p. 20.