

Fay Gillis (Wells)



Helen "Fay" Gillis Wells, October 15, 1908 – December 2, 2002

In August 1929, Fay began flying at the Curtiss Flying School. In early September, right after she soloed, Fay joined the Caterpillar Club when her airplane fell apart in the sky. Founded in 1922, the Caterpillar Club membership requirements are: "A person must have jumped from a disabled aircraft with a parachute to save their life." Undaunted, on October 5, Fay earned Pilot License No. 9497.

Immediately, the Curtiss-Wright Corporation hired Fay to demonstrate their aircraft nationwide. In 1930, Fay received her Commercial Pilot's License. During 1930-34, Fay joined her family because her

father was working in the Soviet Union. With her aviation and journalism contacts, Fay wrote for the New York Herald Tribune, The New York Times, and the Associated Press. As she became known in the Russian aviation network, Fay became the first American woman to pilot a Soviet civil aircraft, and the first foreigner to own a glider. In 1933, she used her Russian connections to help Wiley Post's solo round-the-world flight. In 1935, when Post invited Fay to co-pilot in another round-the-world flight, she declined because she eloped with Linton Wells, a pioneer newsman.

The Wells became a dynamic foreign correspondent team. In 1935, they covered the Italo-Ethiopian War for the New York Herald. Fay and Linton pioneered radio broadcast reporting. Upon their return to the United States, they both continued newspaper and radio reporting. In 1964, Fay was hired by Storer Broadcasting Company, the largest privately-owned U.S. radio and television broadcaster. Fay became the first female accredited White House correspondent. Fay covered Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter. In 1972, she was one of only three women reporters selected to cover the historic Nixon trip to China. Fay retired in 1977.

During her many years in journalism, aviation was always in her heart. In 1962, using her extensive government and media contacts, she promoted the U.S. Postal Service issuing of the Amelia Earhart Airmail postage stamp. The Wells were key supporters in the creation of the International Forest of Friendship, which Fay co-chaired for many years.

Over her lifetime, Fay Gillis Wells received many aviation and broadcasting awards: 1972 Woman of the Year by OX5 Aviation Pioneers, 1984 Women's Aerospace Achievement Award, 1992 WAI Pioneer Hall of Fame, 1998 Esther Van Wagoner Tufty Award for broadcasting achievement, 2001 National Aeronautic Association Katharine Wright Award, 2002 Amelia Earhart Pioneering Achievement Award, and the American Women in Radio and Television Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2002, Lillian Brinnon and Howard Fried penned a book about this trailblazer, *Fay Gillis Wells: In the Air & On the Air*.

Photo: Fay Gilles Wells | Intl Women Air & Space Museum

– By Penny Rafferty Hamilton, *Idaho Chapter*

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Maiden Name: Helen Fay Gillis

Married Name(s): Wells

Date of birth: October 15, 1908

Birthplace: Minneapolis, Minnesota

Date of death: December 2, 2002

Death place: Fairfax, Virginia

Occupation(s): pilot, journalist, broadcaster

License(s): 9497; 1929

Known stats:

1. Chairman of the first international 99s convention in 1967
2. One of four women to write the "call-to-the-colors" letter

Publications:

1. Martin, Douglas. "Fay Gillis Wells, 94, Aviator and Journalist." The New York Times. Sept. 1, 2002.
2. "Fay Gillis Wells." The Telegraph. Dec. 11, 2001.

Award(s):

1. 1972 Woman of the Year by OX5 Aviation Pioneers
2. 1984 Women's Aerospace Achievement Award
3. 1984 McDonald Distinguished Stateman and Stateswoman of Aviation Award
4. 1998 Esther Van Wagoner Tufty Award for broadcasting and personal achievement
5. 2001 Katherine Wright Award for outstanding contributions to aviation
6. 2002 Amelia Earhart Pioneering Achievement Award
7. 2002 American Women in Radio and Television Lifetime Achievement Award
8. In 1995, Gene and Carolyn Shoemaker, famous discoverers of comets and asteroid, named Asteroid 4820 in Fay's honor.

Miscellaneous information:

1. Married Linton Wells (foreign correspondent) in 1935; died in 1976; one son
2. Over her life, Fay had two cheetahs, a leopard, a lemur, and a small fox from the Sahara Desert as pets.

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3. In 1929, she became one of the first women pilots to become a member of the Caterpillar Club after a bailout of an airplane to save her life when her plane disintegrated during aerobatics over Long Island.
4. From 1930-1934, while in the Soviet Union, she traveled as a correspondent covering aviation activities for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and as a special reporter for *The New York Times* and Associated Press.
5. She was the first American woman to fly a Soviet civil airplane
6. She was the first foreigner to own a Soviet glider
7. Linton and Fay spent their honeymoon covering the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the Syrian riots for the *Herald Tribune*.
8. Linton and Fay pioneered overseas radio broadcasts from Latin America in 1938 for *The Magic Key of RCA*.
9. Opened the Washington News Bureau for the Storer Broadcasting Company in 1963.
10. From 1964-1977, she served as Storer's White House correspondent. She was the first female broadcaster accredited to the White House, and one of three women reports chosen to accompany President Nixon to China in 1972.
11. Lived on a houseboat for four years and designed nautical furniture
12. Biggest regret was missing out on being an astronaut

File contents:

1. No photos or artifacts