

## **Florence E. Klingensmith**

Although she may not have been the Miss America type, North Dakota's first female licensed pilot, Florence Klingensmith, a founding member of The Ninety-Nines, was very attractive. In August 1928, Florence was living in Fargo as a 24-year-old divorcee. Having been a motorcycle daredevil in her early years in Minnesota, she was inspired to take flying lessons after an exciting visit to Fargo by Charles Lindbergh. She began her flying lessons at the Fargo Hanson Auto and Electrical School.

Florence was very enterprising. That summer, she agreed to be a skydiver to pay for flight lessons. In the winter of 1928, she actually went door-to-door soliciting sponsors and money to purchase a plane. Spunky Florence would use the plane to promote Fargo at 1929 flying meets and air races.

Fargo Laundry owner, William T. Lee, and other Fargo business leaders raised \$3,000 (which would be almost \$50,000 now) to buy her Monocoupe. Florence flew her new plane back to Fargo's Hector Field, where she was working as a mechanic's apprentice. The new plane was christened "Miss Fargo."

In June 1929, Florence Klingensmith became the first licensed woman pilot in North Dakota. That summer she barn-stormed county fairs, worked as operations manager at Hector Field, and flew in her first race, where she took fourth place.

On June 22, 1931, before more than 50,000 spectators, including National Aeronautics Association officials, Florence took off from Minneapolis Wold Chamberlain Field. Four and a half hours later she landed, "A trifle groggy and gagged by gas fumes," with a verified record of 1,078 loops.

At the 1931 National Air Races in Cleveland, OH, she won four woman-only events and claimed \$4,200 (currently about

\$72,000) in prize money. At the 1932 Nationals, she won the most coveted prize in women's aviation: the Amelia Earhart

Trophy. It was presented by Amelia Earhart herself, along with the grand prize of an Essex Terraplane automobile.

Florence continued on in aviation fame, until her tragic death on September 4, 1933, while flying a bright red Gee Bee Model Y Senior Sportster. It happened during the prestigious \$10,000 Frank Phillips Trophy Race at the International Air Races in Chicago, where she was the first and only woman who entered. The fabric-covered airplane, souped-up with a

680 horsepower Lycoming engine, began to rip off when Florence was in fourth place and she had to leave the course. On that fateful day, just one day after her twenty-ninth birthday, the powerful plane crashed and Florence was instantly killed. In addition to the tragedy, her death was used as an excuse to bar women from competing with men in future air races.

North Dakota's "Miss Fargo", Florence Klingensmith, deserves so much credit for opening the skies for women and putting North Dakota Aviation in the history books.

*By Penny Hamilton*

*America's Amazing Airports book author, Penny Rafferty Hamilton, a Colorado 99, is currently researching historic women in aviation for her next book, Inspiring Words For & By Air & Space Women.*

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