

## Louise McPhetridge Thaden



Born in Bentonville, Arkansas, in November 1905, Louise was fascinated with flying. Luckily, in the fall of 1926, Walter Beech, the aviation entrepreneur, hired Louise as an assistant for his San Francisco West Coast Travel Air distributor. Louise worked during the day. At night, she took flying lessons. In just a few months, she earned her pilot's license. She logged enough flight hours to qualify for her transport license.

Between December 1928 and April 1929, Louise set three aviation records in altitude, endurance, and speed. She is the first American woman to hold these records simultaneously.

In 1929, Louise entered the first Women's Air Derby piloting a Beech Travel Air. On August 18, 1929, female flyers left Santa Monica, California. On August 26, 1929, an estimated 18,000

people gathered at the Cleveland Municipal Airport in Ohio to greet the women pilots, who had flown 2,800 miles. Louise won with the fastest time of 20 hours, 19 minutes, and 4 seconds.

In November, 1929, Louise and many of the other Women's Air Derby pilots formed The Ninety-Nines organization. Thaden served as vice president (1931-36) and as treasurer (1930-34).

In 1936, Louise was invited to race in the Bendix Transcontinental Air Race. She teamed with co-pilot Blanche Noyes, also a founding member of The Ninety-Nines. Flying a Beech Staggerwing C17R, Louise and Blanche won the \$4,500 first place money, along with the coveted Bendix Air Trophy. They also won the \$2,500 prize for first female team to cross the finish line. Today, that would be about \$138,000. Later, Louise won the 1936 Harmon Trophy for Outstanding Aviator.

For many years, Thaden was a demonstration pilot for the Beech Aircraft Company. During World War II, she volunteered with [Ruth Nichols Relief Wings](#).

In her book, “High, Wide and Frightened,” Louise wrote, “Flight is the essence of the spirit. It nurtures the soul. It is awesome. Often ethereal. Glorious. Emotionally wondrous and all-pervading. Intangible.”

From *101 Trailblazing Women of Air and Space: Aviators and Astronauts* by Penny Rafferty Hamilton, PH.D.

Photo courtesy San Diego Air and Space Museum archive