

Museum News: Frances Harrell Marsalis ~ Aviatrix

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Terrell County Memorial Museum

Frances Carter Harrell Marsalis was another Sanderson kid who made her mark on the world. In her very short life she set records as a female aviator at a time when women flyers were just beginning to take to the skies.

Frances was born Dec. 26, 1900, in Del Rio, Texas, to Willis and Ida Carter. Mr. Carter worked as a hostler at the roundhouse in Del Rio, Texas, but moved his family to Sanderson in 1910 and spent the next 32 years as the roundhouse night foreman.

Frances was present in October, 1911, when the charismatic Cal Rodgers landed his tiny Wright "EX" flyer in front of the Terrell County Courthouse. He was attempting the first transcontinental flight in U. S. history, and eventually would succeed. As she watched him sail away two days later, a desire was born in her ten-year-old psyche that would never fade away. Someday she would be a flyer.

Frances spent her late childhood and teen years in Sanderson and graduated from Sanderson High School about 1917.

On Dec. 22, 1917, Frances married George Murray Harrell. Three children were born to the marriage, but Murray and Frances parted ways in 1925. The children stayed with him.

Free of family responsibilities, Frances renewed her dream of flying. Working as a credit manager in a Houston department store, Frances received an inheritance which enabled her to pursue that dream. She immediately packed her belongings and moved to Long Island, New York, where she learned to fly at Roosevelt Field, Valley Stream, NY.

For six months she worked as an aircraft mechanic, learning airplanes from top to bottom by dismantling them and putting them back together. Pilots in those days had to learn to be mechanics, since qualified repairmen were few and far between.

After soloing, she soon landed a job as a demonstrator of "Brownies," an English monoplane sold in the US from her home airport.

Then, she worked for Curtiss-Wright aircraft, which in those days built airplanes. She ferried new planes to their owners and demonstrated the features of the Curtiss aircraft.

In her spare time, however, she barnstormed and raced, traveling the circuit of air shows which were immensely popular. She developed an act called "The Spin of Death" which thrilled crowds with her derring-do. She even cashed in on her fame by making Camel cigarette and breakfast cereal advertisements.

In 1929, she and 25 other female pilots, including good friend Amelia Earhart, met to form "The Ninety Nines," a women's aviation group, whose purpose was to encourage and support women who wanted to fly.

During these years she set and broke endurance records, each time extending the length of her flights. With fellow pilot Louise Thaden, they kept their aircraft aloft for eight days, four hours and five minutes in 1932.

Refueling was done in the air by dropping a gas hose from the refueling plane to the ladies, who took turns operating the nozzle while they clutched the wing.

They also handled the transfer of supplies, food, water and cosmetics...the attempt was sponsored by Outdoor Girl Cosmetics...which were suspended from a supply plane in a basket and caught with one hand as they perched on the wing and held on for dear life.

With Helen Ritchey, who would go on to become the first female commercial airline pilot in the world, they set a new record on January 8, 1934, of nine days, twenty-one hours and forty-two minutes.

During a refueling session on this flight the gas nozzle slipped and tore a hole in the fabric of the aircraft wing. With Frances piloting the craft and holding it steady, Helen climbed out on the wing with a needle and thread and calmly sewed the rip back together!

In the mean time Frances lived a life of gala parties, press junkets and glitzy public appearances as she basked in the limelight of her exciting life.

She found time to remarry in 1930 to her flight instructor, William Iverson Marsalis, a Mississippi boy also caught up in the glamorous lifestyle. The marriage was short-lived, however.

Marsalis went on to a distinguished career in the military during World War II. Afterwards, his record becomes rather cloudy with an involvement in a failed secret operation running arms to Central America, for which he served a prison sentence, and a rumored involvement in the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

On August 4, 1934, Frances entered the Cleveland Air Race, piloting a Waco speed plane. She had the audience gasping as she cut close her turns around the pylons.

Dashing up to try to take the lead from the two frontrunners, her aircraft was caught in the backwash of the leaders on a turn and dipped too low, scraping a wingtip on the ground. The plane began to cart-wheel over and over, finally crashing to the earth.

Frances lay seriously injured, hopelessly tangled in the debris. She was cut from the wreckage by spectators with pocketknives, but died in the ambulance on the way to hospital.

Her body was flown back to Roosevelt Field in New York and lay in state in her home hangar. Her funeral was held from the hangar with crowds of friends and adoring public in attendance. Sadly, none of her family could attend the service.

William Marsalis took Helen to his family cemetery in Mississippi where she was interred. In a passing comment to a reporter, he mentioned that their divorce had been finalized only four days before her death.



Frances Carter Harrell Marsalis
Photo courtesy of Jack Clyde Carter

Many Sanderson residents pass their entire lives within Terrell County. Others, such as Frances Carter Harrell Marsalis, yearn for more. A pioneer in women's aviation, Frances clawed her way to the top of a world dominated by men. Her adventurous life of glamour, thrills and gender trailblazing proved that nothing can limit the human spirit, if only you have faith in yourself and stick to your flight plan.