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Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

Frances Harrell Marsalis

~ Aviatrix ~



Photo: chumbleg.files.wordpress.com/

Frances Carter Harrell Marsalis, center, cuts up on roller skates with her fellow lady aviators, Amelia Earhart, Betty Gilles and Elvy Kalep. The Sanderson native made quite a name for herself in the aviation world. In the background is the Waco speed plane which brought her stellar career to a tragic end.

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, TX, but moved his family to Sanderson in 1910 and spent the next 32 years as the

roundhouse
night fore-
man.

Frances spent her late childhood and teen years in Sanderson, graduating 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 divorced in 1925.

Frances Carter Harrell's love for adventure and thrills led her to the aviation world. Working as a credit manager in a Houston department store, Frances received an inheritance which enabled her to pursue her dream of flying. She immediately packed her belongings and moved to Long Island, New York, where she learned to fly at Roosevelt Field, Valley Stream, Long Island, 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 being sold in the US from her home airport.

She also worked for Curtiss-Wright aircraft, which in those



Photo: National Air and Space Museum Archives

Frances Harrell Marsalis and Helen Ritchey, Floyd Bennett Field, New York, January 14, 1934

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 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. The purpose of the group was to encourage women to become flyers.

During these years she set (and broke)



Photo : pgdigs.tumblr.com

Plane in which Frances Marsalis and Helen Ritchey achieved a new endurance record.

days built airplanes. She worked as a transport pilot, ferrying new planes to their owners and demonstrating 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

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 necessities (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 the other.



Frances Marsalis, right, and Amelia Earhart, left, at a meeting of the Ninety Nines, ca 1930.

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, newspaper interviews and glitzy public appearances, as she basked in the limelight of her exciting life.

She found time to remarry in 1930, to another transport pilot, William Iverson Marsalis, a Mississippi boy also caught up in the glamorous lifestyle, and who had taught her to fly. The marriage was short-lived, however.

Marsalis himself went on to a distinguished career in the military in World War II. Afterwards, his history becomes rather cloudy with an involvement in a failed secret operation running arms to Central America (for which he served a



Photo: 3.bp.blogspot.com

Frances Harrell Marsalis

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 front-runners, her aircraft was caught in the backwash of the leaders on a turn and dipped too low, scraping a wingtip on the ground. It cartwheeled over and over, finally crashing to the ground.

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 taken back to Roosevelt Field in New York and lay in state in one of the hangars. 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.

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

Many of Sanderson's residents passed their entire lives within Terrell County. Others, such as Frances Carter Harrell Marsalis, yearned for more. A pioneer in women's aviation, Frances clawed



Photo: Wikipedia

Waco "S" Series Cabin Biplane, similar to the one in which Frances Marsalis lost her life at the Cleveland Air Show, August 4, 1934. Pronounced "wah-co," it has no relation to the city, but is an acronym of the Weaver Aircraft Company.

her way to the top of a world dominated by men. Her adventuresome 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.



Photo: Public Domain

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