

Celebrating Women's History Month
Blanche Stuart Scott

(1885 — 1970)



Blanche Stuart Scott seated at the controls of a Curtiss Model D, circa early 1910s.

**Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division
[reproduction number LC-DIG-ggbain-12209]**

In the early 20th century, Blanche Stuart Scott wanted fame and adventure. An automobile manufacturer and an airplane manufacturer wanted publicity. Everyone got what they wanted – and Scott made history as a technological pioneer for women.

The daughter of a successful Rochester hoof-paste manufacturer, Blanche Stuart Scott was born on April 8, 1885. She grew up a “tomboy,” excited by technological breakthroughs in transportation. She learned to drive an automobile in her teens, and her enrollment in a genteel finishing school didn’t suppress her need for speed. As a young adult, she spent much of her time

in New York mingling with celebrities, and hoped to become one herself.

After reading about a man driving an automobile across the country, Scott was convinced that a woman could do the same thing. She convinced the Willys-Overland company to let her drive one of their vehicles from New York City to San Francisco. Scott would prove that a woman could drive and maintain a car as well as a man, while Willys-Overland would prove the durability of their cars.

With one traveling companion, Scott set out in the “Lady Overland” on May 16, 1910. She reached San Francisco on July 23. Newspapers across the country reported on her progress and celebrated her success. By the time she wrote a book about the trip for Willys-Overland, she was seeking new adventures in the air.

Historians don’t know whether Scott was the first woman to fly an airplane. She may have been inspired by a Wright brothers flying exhibition in her honor when the Lady Overland stopped in Dayton, Ohio. Sometime late in the summer of 1910, while taking lessons on the ground from airplane pioneer Glenn Curtiss, her plane briefly took off. In October Curtiss added her to his promotional flying team. Scott quit after getting married in January 1911, but soon returned to the air as an exhibition flier and test pilot. While another woman, Harriet Quimby, was first to get a pilot’s license, Scott was hailed as the “first American woman who can really fly” and “the Tomboy of the Air.”

Early aviation was extremely dangerous. Scott was flying in an air show outside Boston on July 1, 1912, when she saw Quimby die in a crash. Afterward, the mayor of Boston told her that flying was too risky for women. Scott told a reporter, “All aviators get it, sooner or later,” and consciously risked death in specialty “death dives” that thrilled audiences. But by the age of 30 she had grown sick of people expecting her to crash and quit stunt flying.

Blanche Stuart Scott started a new career in the entertainment industry. She worked on movie and radio scripts in Hollywood, then became a popular radio personality on the “Rambling With Roberta” show back in Rochester. For the rest of her life she cultivated her place in transportation history as a museum consultant and a regular subject for media interviews. A decade after her death on January 12, 1970, she was honored on a U.S. postage stamp as a woman who rode over barriers to achievement and adventure.

For more information about Women in Aviation History go to the National Air and Space Museum online at <http://bit.ly/i5XBj0>.

This is one of a series of four Celebrating Women's History Month profiles, written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA - Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved 2016.