

‘Aviatrix’ Amelia Earhart twice visitor to Twin Cities

This July will mark the 80th anniversary of Amelia Earhart’s mysterious disappearance in the Central Pacific while attempting to become the first female pilot to circumnavigate the globe.

The internationally renowned “aviatrix” paid a visit to the Twin Cities not once but twice—the last time a little more than a year before her ill-fated flight that ended in one of the greatest mysteries of the 20th century.

For her first visit, May 31, 1931, Earhart made an unexpected stopover at the Bloomington Airport, which was then located several miles north of Normal. She had attended the Indianapolis 500 the day before, and was now headed to the Pacific coast. “Her coming was a double sensation for she piloted the first autogiro [or autogyro] to visit the local field,” noted *The Pantagraph* at the time. “Cameras clicked” as the celebrity pilot ordered 30 gallons of gasoline for her “queer craft.”

Traveling with Earhart was a pilot representing the Willow Grove, Penn.-based Pitcairn-Cierva Autogiro Company. Autogiros feature an engine-powered propeller providing thrust, and an unpowered, helicopter-like rotor providing lift (wind or the aircraft’s own motion then spins the rotor).

This was the second visit to the area of a world famous (or soon-to-be world famous) aviator. Four and a half years earlier, in November 1926, Charles Lindbergh, with his airmail plane running low on fuel during a cold and cloudy night, bailed out some 13,000 feet over Central Illinois, landing outside the tiny McLean County community of Covell. Less than six months later, he would complete the first solo, non-stop flight across the Atlantic Ocean.

Earhart, born in Atchison, Kan. in 1897, already held a fistful of aviation records by the time she first stopped in Bloomington-Normal. In June 1928, for instance, she became the first woman—albeit accompanied by a pilot and pilot/mechanic—to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. And on May 20, 1932, one year after her initial visit to this area, she made the same oceanic flight, but this time all alone.

Earhart’s second Bloomington-area visit, April 6-7, 1936, included an overnight stay at the Illinois Hotel (today known as the Illinois House) on the Courthouse Square. Invited by the Business and Professional Women’s Club, she was here to deliver a talk, “Aviation Adventures,” at the old Bloomington Coliseum.

Traveling alone, the 38-year-old aviator was seen pulling up to the hotel in a small blue coupe and honking for the bellboy to take her bags. “She wore no hat on her tousled blond head,” reported *The Pantagraph*. “Her brown gabardine suit was a three-piece affair, slim and tailored, worn with a brown-and-white polka dot blouse and white collar.” On her jacket lapel was emblem of the Ninety-Nines, an organization of women

pilots established in 1929, with Earhart as the first president. The emblem included a tiny propeller that revolved around a pearl.

During her spring 1936 visit, there was already much talk about Earhart circumnavigating the globe. “The announcement that I am to make a flight around the world in June is erroneous,” she told *The Pantagraph*. “I am booked for lectures until May 1st, and one doesn’t plan a world trip in 30 days.”

Earhart also noted that the aviation industry was shedding its barnstorming, daredevil reputation to become an increasingly dependable and vital mode of transportation. “Aviation should no longer be regarded as a matter of pilots,” she said, “anymore than railroads are thought of in terms of Casey Jones and the men in the locomotive cabs.”

During her talk at the Bloomington Coliseum, Earhart explained how she coped with the inevitable jitters before her many acts of aviation adventurism—such as becoming, in January 1935, the first person to fly solo from Hawaii (Honolulu) to the U.S. mainland (Oakland, Cal.). “I have my own philosophy of worry,” she said. “All worry must be finished two months before an expedition sets off. If the goal is not worth it, give up the plan, but never worry. Hamlet would have made a poor pilot, because he was such a worrier.”

“Why do you do such things?” was the most common question asked of Earhart. “There is no reason except my own wish,” she said in answer. “I have no claim to having augmented scientific data, though each successful flight builds more firmly the foundation of faith in aviation which is the goal we all strive for.”

The following day, after her Coliseum lecture the night before, she toured the eastside Bloomington Municipal Airport. Opened less than two years earlier, in October 1934, its paved runways were a marked improvement over the soggy turf of the old airport in north Normal. While there she took a ride in “Scoop,” *The Pantagraph*’s very own airplane. Accompanying Earhart were pilot Davis Merwin, the newspaper’s aviation obsessed publisher, and younger brother Loring (see accompanying photograph). The single-engine Stinson SR-Reliant, with room enough for a pilot and several passengers, was actually *The Pantagraph*’s fourth generation Scoop (thus its designation as Scoop IV).

After this Bloomington visit, Earhart made public appearances in Princeton, Ill., and Macomb before meeting her husband George Palmer Putnam in Chicago. The two were then scheduled to travel to West Lafayette, Ind., where Earhart served as a visiting faculty member of Purdue University’s aviation department.

On June 1, 1937, Earhart and crewmember Fred Noonan embarked on a globe-spanning flight in a modified twin-engine Lockheed Electra 10E. On July 2, the two pilots and their plane were lost during an attempt to reach tiny Howland Island in the Central Pacific. They only had about 7,000 miles left of their 29,000-mile journey. No physical evidence of the Earhart, Noonan or the plane has ever been found.

During her 1936 lecture in Bloomington, Earhart charmed the audience with her self-deprecating humor. The Pantagraph noted that her talk began with a “lively account of mistaken identity, which makes the famous flyer feel that sometimes she does not know who she is, and who she is not.” Earhart recalled a recent incident in which a man struggled to recognize her. “Try the air,” she said, hoping that clue would jar his memory. “Oh yes,” he exclaimed. “I hear you every week. You’re Gracie Allen!”