

A Woman Called “Pancho”: Remembering Florence “Pancho” Barnes

By Nick T. Spark

If you’ve seen the movie *The Right Stuff*, then you’ll remember Florence “Pancho” Barnes. A cantankerous woman with a personality situated somewhere between Mae West and Gypsy Rose Lee, Pancho owned a ranch known as the “Happy Bottom Riding Club.” Located next to Edwards Air Force Base, it was frequented by all the famous pilots of the 1940s and 50s including Howard Hughes and Gen. Jimmy Doolittle. Chuck Yeager cracked his ribs on the gate of Pancho’s corral the day before he flew the X-1 rocket plane supersonic for the first time. Afterwards he celebrated, where else? At Pancho’s place, with a steak dinner provided “on the house.”

As a hostess, Pancho would have shocked Martha Stewart. She was sharp-tongued, wore pants, smoked cigarettes, and drank. But to the pilots at Edwards she was more than just local color. Pancho was a colleague and a confidant. “She could talk about airplanes with expertise,” remembers Bob Hoover, who was 25 when he met her in 1947. “I recognized she was unique.” Chuck Yeager says he liked Pancho instantly because “she loved pilots and shared our code.”

Flying seemed like destiny for Pancho. Her grandfather T.S. Lowe built a Balloon Corps during the Civil War. In 1910, the elderly Lowe took ten-year-old Florence to one of the very first air shows. “Everyone will be flying airplanes when you grow up,” Lowe told Florence. “You’ll be a flier, too.”

Florence vowed to become a pilot, but the opportunity didn’t present itself for years. Meanwhile her childhood proved difficult. Despite a high society upbringing she was a tomboy who hunted with a gun. She wasn’t beautiful --- Florence had plain looks – but she was always at the center of things and full of mischief. Frustrated, her parents sent Florence to a Catholic school. She promptly escaped on horseback to Tijuana. In desperation a marriage was arranged to Rankin Barnes, an Episcopal reverend.

Mrs. Florence Barnes was predictably unhappy as a minister’s wife. Eventually her restless soul got the better of her. She left her husband, disguised herself as a man, boarded a ship and set off for Mexico. She returned to Los Angeles sporting a new attitude and a nickname: Pancho.

The newly-minted Pancho Barnes used her inheritance to live independently, and with two key precepts in mind: “When you have a choice, choose happy” and “Nothing exceeds like excess!” Then Pancho took flying lessons. On her first solo, she buzzed her husband’s church. “Flying,” she told a shocked friend, “Makes me feel like a sex maniac in a whorehouse.”

The newspapers called Pancho a “high society aviatrix” who was the “wife of a Pasadena reverend.” In reality Pancho was rarely demure and never subservient. “She was an

individualist all the way,” Elinor Smith wrote. “Her casual dress, salty conversation, and predilection for foul-smelling cigars...did not project the image of a wealthy patron of the arts.”

Pancho ran a barnstorming troupe known as the “Mystery Circus of the Air”. She also worked as a test pilot, conducting load tests on Lockheed’s Vega. In early 1929, she took part in an air show organized by Bobbi Trout. Later that year, the two flew in the first “Powder Puff Derby” from Santa Monica to Cleveland. Nineteen of the thirty-four registered female pilots in the U.S. participated, including Amelia Earhart and Gladys O’Donnell. Unfortunately Pancho crashed, and was knocked out of the race.

Pancho wasn’t out of the air for long. On August 1, 1930, she took off from the Van Nuys airport in a brand new Travel Air Model R “Mystery Ship” and flew at 196 m.p.h. in sustained flight. In so doing she eclipsed Amelia Earhart’s speed record and became the world’s fastest woman. She was 29 years old.

Pancho followed one record with another, becoming the first woman to fly to Mexico City. On her return she became the first female stunt pilot in Hollywood, flying in Howard Hughes’ epic *Hell’s Angels* and Howard Hawks’ *Dawn Patrol*.

In 1932, Pancho and Bobbi Trout organized the Women’s Air Reserves, a female civil air patrol. To publicize their effort, Pancho and Bobbi circled the Statue of Liberty wingtip to wingtip. It was a bright moment in Pancho’s career, but one of the last.

The Great Depression sent Pancho’s finances into a nosedive. So, she moved to the desert north of Los Angeles and built a flight school which she had to close after Pearl Harbor. Still, her ranch prospered, and after the War she added a rustic restaurant.

One day in 1947 Gen. Jimmy Doolittle visited. After a ride on Pancho’s horse Happy, Doolittle commented that he had “a Happy bottom.” Barnes renamed the ranch the “Happy Bottom Riding Club” on the spot. While it served as a hotel, the ranch also became a hangout for military pilots. There was no officer’s club at nearby Edwards A.F.B., and Pancho’s provided a respite from the doldrums. So that the pilots would not feel lonesome, Pancho recruited beautiful hostesses. The name “Happy Bottom” and those nice-looking girls later caused trouble. People believed Pancho was running a whorehouse! The truth was different, but at the same time Pancho didn’t exactly discourage the rumors. She believed in publicity.

Whether Pancho heard the sonic boom emanating from the X-1 that fateful day, October 14, 1947, is hard to say. One thing that is certain, is that Pancho hosted the raucous celebration. She was, after all, a friend and in a way, a ground-based wingman for all the pilots at Edwards.

Unfortunately, it couldn’t last. The Air Force wanted to expand Edwards, and Pancho’s ranch stood in the way. In the midst of a legal battle, a fire destroyed part of the club. She never could rebuild, and had to struggle to eke out a living. Shortly before she died in

1975, Pancho was welcomed back to Edwards. To this day the base celebrates an annual “Pancho Barnes Day”.

For years people believed that little survived the fire -- Pancho told friends she'd lost everything. But recently, a treasure-trove of her personal materials surfaced, safeguarded by a collector, Dr. Lou D'Elia. The existence of these materials, and Pancho's tough, daring, and outrageous personality have inspired me and filmmaker Amanda Pope to create a documentary film. Pancho is not here in the flesh to tell us about her life, but now hopefully her amazing story can be shared with the world.

SIDEBAR: “Pancho Barnes!” A Documentary Film

The documentary about Florence “Pancho” Barnes is being made on a non-profit basis with PBS of Orange County, California. Your tax-deductible contribution can help.

Timing is critical: a \$75,000 challenge grant must be matched before July 1st .

Donations can be made to: “KOCE-TV Foundation” c/o Ed Miskevich - Assistant Station Manager, 15721 Gothard Street, Huntington Beach, CA 92647 (indicate “Pancho Barnes” on your check).

Visit www.panchobarnesfilm.com to read more, donate using Paypal, and see a trailer featuring Gen. Chuck Yeager.

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