

Queen Bessie is Up Up and Away

By: Paige Platter

Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman was born in 1892 in Austin Texas. She was the tenth child of George and Susan Coleman. Only nine of the thirteen Coleman children survived past childhood. When she was just two years old, Bessie and her family moved to Waxahachie Texas where they lived as Sharecroppers. Coleman began attending school there at the age of six. She had to walk four miles every day to attend the segregated school, which only has one classroom. Coleman loved to read and set herself apart as an excellent math student. (Women Aviators: From Amelia Earhart to Sally Ride, Making History in Air and Space).



In 1901, George Coleman left his family and returned to Oklahoma, or as it was known during the time “Indian Territory” to find better opportunities. One of George’s parents was Cherokee. When she was twelve, Coleman was accepted into Missionary Baptist Church School on a scholarship. Then when she turned eighteen, she took her life savings and enrolled in Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University in Langston Oklahoma. Coleman was only able to complete one term before her money ran out. (The Handbook of Texas Online).

In 1916, at the age of 24, Coleman moved to Chicago and lived with her brothers. There she worked as a manicurist at White Sox Barber Shop and would listen to stories about pilots returning home from WWI. Coleman took a second job at a chili parlor in hopes of saving money to become a pilot. (Black Birds in the Sky: The Legacies of Bessie Coleman and Dr. Mae Jemison). At the time American flight schools would not accept blacks or women, Robert S. Abbot, founder, and publisher of *Chicago Defender* encouraged Coleman to study abroad. Abbot published Coleman’s request for funding in the *Defender* and with financial support from a banker, Jesse Binga as well as the *Defender*-Coleman was off to Paris.

Coleman left for Paris on November 20th, 1920, after taking french language classes at a school in Chicago. In Paris, she learned to fly a Nieuport 564 biplane with, as Coleman called it, "a steering system that consisted of a vertical stick the thickness of a baseball bat in front of the pilot and a rudder bar under the pilot's feet." (Queen Bess: Daredevil Aviator). On June 15th, 1921, Coleman became the first African American and first Native American to earn their pilot’s license, as well as the first to earn an international aviation license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale. (National Women’s History Museum). Coleman spent the next two months studying with a french pilot just outside Paris and in September of that same year. Coleman was headed back to America where she became a media sensation.

Coleman began to perform in Airshows-she was known as “Queen Bess” and would mainly fly surplus army planes left over from the war. She made her big debut in September of 1922 at an event honors the all-black 369th Infantry Regiment of World War I in Long Island. Six weeks

later she returned to Chicago to perform daredevil stunts at the Checkerboard Airdrome. (Bessie Coleman: Pioneer Chicago Aviator). Coleman's life was cut tragically short when a plane she had just recently bought took a dive while flying. Coleman was thrown from the plane and died on impact. She was thirty-four years old. 10,000 mourners attended her ceremony in Chicago, including Ida B. Wells. (Overlooked No More: Bessie Coleman, Pioneering African-American Aviatrix).