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Institution

Bessie Coleman

If I can create the minimum of my plans and desires there shall be no regrets.

—Bessie Coleman

Bessie Coleman's sister, Elois Patterson, wrote "Brave Bessie," an article about her adventurous sister. It has been excerpted here.

Bessie Coleman was called 'Brave Bessie' because she had fearlessly taken to the air when aviation was a greater risk than it is today and when few men had been able to muster such courage. An avid reader, Bessie was well informed on what the Negro was doing and what he had done. Given the opportunity, she knew he could become as efficient in aviation as anyone. She toyed with the idea of learning to fly, even displayed an airplane made by a Negro boy in the window of the barber shop in which she was a manicurist. She was refused by each aviation school to which she applied, sometimes because of her race and sometimes because she was both a Negro and a woman. She took her quest to Robert S. Abbott, a founder, editor, and publisher of the Chicago Weekly Defender. He advised her to study French and Bessie promptly enrolled in a language school in Chicago's Loop. That accomplished, he assisted her in contacting an accredited aviation school in France. She planned to obtain certification and return to the United States to open an aviation training school for young blacks.

"Bessie made two trips to Europe, returning to Chicago from the second one in 1922 . . . holder of a certificate from the FAI [Federation Aeronautique Internationale *, the flying school that issued Bessie's license]. . . . She put on an air exhibition in 1922 at Checkerboard Field, today known as Midway Airport, Chicago, after which she received many calls from young Negro men, anxious to learn to fly. Bessie had obtained her certificate at great personal expense and sacrifice. She told prospective students that they had to wait until either some forward-thinking blacks opened a Federation training school or until Bessie herself could give enough demonstrations and accrue sufficient money to undertake opening a school herself.

"Bessie barnstormed across the country and undertook a rigorous program of speaking engagements. . . . When Bessie appeared over the town in which she was reared, Waxahachie, Texas, she was permitted to use the university grounds of the whites for her exhibition flying. She refused to exhibit unless her people were allowed into the grounds through the front entrance, although they were separated once inside the grounds. . . . She decided to make an all-out effort to establish a school where she could train young Negro men to fly.

"I remember one letter she wrote me saying she had taken an escort, and even went to a poolroom, so determined was she to have Negro men become air-minded. The very last letter that I received from her said, 'I am right on the threshold of opening a school.'"