2011

Chanute Air Museum, Chanute Air Force Base, and Bessie Coleman

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Recommended Citation
http://spark.parkland.edu/ah/35

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Chanute Air Museum

Honors Project; Article 1

Kelley Heaney

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Visiting museums is always a great past time. Museums teach many things since they can be centered on whatever the originator wants to show to people. If a person has a collection of marbles he would like to show, he can start a marble museum. Just viewing the marbles educates visitors as to colors, types, sizes etc. The Champaign area is full of great local museums. Some are funded through the University of Illinois, but others are funded mostly by donations and admission charges. Museums need to have buildings that are in good repair in order to protect the collection. Clothing, books, and documents are especially easily destroyed by moisture and insects. The Chanute Air Museum in Rantoul, IL, is a museum that is rich in educational opportunities focusing on the former Air Force Base as well as the village of Rantoul.

A tour of the museum begins with a lesson in air flight, something man had been trying to achieve since ancient times. Octave Chanute was one of those people fascinated with the possibility of being able to fly with the birds. An engineer, Chanute made his fortune constructing bridges throughout the country. He also designed and built gliders in his spare time, creating a reputation that came to the attention of the Wright Brothers, also trying to build a successful flying machine. It was after consulting with Chanute that the brother’s design was successful and flight became possible, in 1903. In 1917, the US government honored his memory by naming its third Army Air Field after him.

Construction was completed in just ninety days during that summer and the first plane to land was on July 4. As visitors leave the flight history exhibit they enter a hallway lined with photographs of the base from the early days to the closing days. These photos depict special events such as the second visit by Charles Lindbergh in 1939 and the presidential visit of President Johnson in 1965. They also show museum visitors everyday life on a military base. Parades, baseball games, construction projects, important people and everyday people are all together on the wall tracing the time of operation.

Other exhibits the visitor will see include a barracks room, mess hall operations, uniforms through the years, water operation life support system sewn into a parachute, flight simulator machines, maps of the US missile sites during the cold war, and how planes were fueled in mid flight. Visitors will also have the opportunity to learn about how Chanute was an instrumental part in the development and success of the famous Tuskegee Airmen.

As a training facility, the base was the place where pilots came to learn instrument reading, navigation skills, communication techniques, weather forecasting abilities as well as aircraft maintenance and repair. The Airmen, part of the 99\textsuperscript{th} Pursuit Squadron had original members that were recruited in Rantoul and stationed there for training before being sent to Alabama.

Early aviators are biographed with particular attention to the Afro-American aviators of the time. Bessie Coleman, first black American (man or woman) to attain a pilot’s license, Cornelius Coffey, the first black to open a flight school, are both memorialized on the wall of the exhibit.
At a museum about an Air Force Base, visitors would expect to see airplanes as well and Chanute has plenty. Over thirty planes, both large and small, are on or near the premises. An exhibit depicting early aviation’s lack of rules, barnstormers, wing walkers and planes built in barns, includes four planes and a hot air balloon. Fighter planes, such as the P-51H Mustang, which was able to reach speeds over 400 mph, and cargo planes like the huge C-130 Hercules with a wing span of over 132 feet, sit waiting for visitors to express awe at the progress made in aviation in such a short time.

Also on display is the missile silos used to house the Air Force’s Minuteman Missiles during the program in the 1960s. These silos were used to train the men and women who would have been responsible for launching them if so ordered, resulting in a nuclear war. The original missile program included the AG-28A Hound Dog Missile which was an air launched missile, meaning that it was launched from a plane. The later LGM- Minuteman Missile was launched from an underground silo. The Strategic Air Command website explains, “The missiles are deployed in "circular" flights of ten missiles controlled by a single, centrally located launch control center (LCC) manned by a Missile Combat Crew. The LCC contains all equipment needed by the crew to control and monitor the missile and the LFs. Each LCC is separated from the others by a minimum of 14 miles and is buried at a depth of 40 to 100 feet below grade.”

Education is important to the Aviation Museum leading to the use of videos in some of the exhibits. The POW/MIA exhibit, as well as the one on the Tuskegee Airmen, uses a continually looping video to explain details that can’t always be expressed in just reading information on the wall. In this video, survivors of the Great Escape in World War II recount their experiences as POW’s in German Concentration camps. Visitors to this exhibit feel emotion while viewing personal effects and stories of some of the lost. Newspapers line the wall and triumph the victory over Japan with recounts of the loss of life on both sides.

Another form of education offered by the museum is in its programs. Offered this summer are two especially important programs. One is Aviation Camp happening June 13-17. It is aimed at kids (boys and girls) in the 7th – 12th grades. The museum press release describes the program’s activities as including hot air balloon demonstrations, building and flying rockets, and hands on experiences with the plane restoration crew. Also included is a trip to the Challenger Space Center in Bloomington IL to experience a simulated space mission.

The second upcoming program is aimed at adult women and girls who are interested in aviation. The second annual Women of Wings will be held on June 25 from 9 a.m. – 3 p.m. Included will be a history of women in aviation, panel discussions, hands on activities, and in introduction to aircraft. A tour of the museum will also be included.

Fees are involved with both programs. For more information and directions, visit the museum’s website at aeromuseum.org.
New Technology at Chanute Base in 1940
Honors Project; Article 2
Kelley Heaney

2011
Constructed in 1917 as one of the first Army Air Bases, Chanute Field originally taught military personnel to fly aeroplanes, as they were originally known as. After the end of World War One, the military reduced funding, no longer recognizing a need for aircraft training and the base was used as a storage facility until 1921. That year, according to Donald Wreckhorst, author of the book *75 Year Pictorial History of Chanute, 1917-1992*, the Air Service Mechanics School was transferred from Kelly Field in Texas to the little base in the big Illinois cornfields. With the classes beginning in April of that year, Chanute was setting a course that would see some astonishing developments in the technology of planes, weather, and other military support systems that the men of the time never dreamed would happen.

Changes on the base reflected those in American society, as well as in technology, which was improving at a rapid rate. The troops at Chanute were no longer trained to be pilots as they were in 1917. Rather, they were now trained as technical support, with skills needed by pilots and ground personnel. These skills would often prove to be imperative while flying combat missions in Europe and Asia. Navigation and weather conjecture were two new technical skills taught at Chanute that were invaluable many times.

Closure rumors had once again left the buildings to decay and those destroyed by fire were not replaced. But in 1936, funding for new buildings was granted and so a Great Renaissance happened in those Illinois cornfields. New equipment and new programs could begin so that students were taught the latest necessary skills, especially important as war was once again looming. In addition to the mechanics school, the parachute courses, and the aircraft welding, the base maintained, since 1935, an instrument school, but in 1937 a new course was introduced called “Blind Flying.”

Since most planes didn’t have the capability to fly high, pilots could see the ground and navigated using roads and other landmarks as a guide. According to airplanes.com, Brigadier General, Jimmy Doolittle came to the conclusion that with better planes, sight navigation was no longer going to be possible. “This need became ever more urgent as aircraft became faster and their range of maneuverability increased. Aircraft were now moving in ways that could cause a pilot to become dangerously disoriented without visual cues. Soon pilots were being trained in the use of navigational instruments, with the emphasis being on developing trust in the instruments, even if the pilot’s senses were giving him contrary information.” Chanute embraced the challenge to teach instrument or blind flying to all pilots for the first time. Now, a pilot would read the instrument panel to determine the plane’s position and direction. These skills were important since on bombing missions in Europe and Japan, the clouds were often used as cover for pilots approaching targets unseen.

Weather conjecture was another crucial factor for successful pilots. Moved from the St. Louis area’s Scott Field in 1940, the weather school taught pilots with the new equipment needed for more accurate weather predictions. Prior to 1940, according to the website noaa.gov, “there were no satellite images and few upper air observations. In 1940 long range forecasting was introduced. This longer forecast, which covered 5 days and which was issued twice a week, was based upon upper air pressure data and correlated with past weather patterns (Whitnah, 1961).” Needing accurate weather predictions and the
knowledge of how to read weather graphs and charts, pilots were educated in these skills. Chanute was able to provide pilot training for the ability to determine what a weather pattern would be like in a few days or a few hours.

Weather patterns and poor navigation were not the only dangers facing pilots and their ground crews during combat. Germany was very advanced in chemical warfare and used it often on Allied troops. According to the website chnm.gmu.edu, "When the United States entered World War I in 1917, the German High Command and the Allies used five kinds of poisonous gases and more than 30 percent, or 70,552, of the Americans wounded in World War I were gas casualties." Due to the large number of men being sent from Chanute to the combat areas in Europe, Chemical Warfare Training was instituted. During this training, gas masks were worn while performing normal duties such as guard or kitchen duty and were worn for up to four hours a day. To express the seriousness of this training, the masks were worn by players during one of the base's basketball games, resulting in great fun for the audience.

Many other changes were made at Chanute during these years. Helicopter courses and jet engine training were begun. Amazingly in 1946, not long before the Korean War, 200 Chinese soldiers were brought to the base to be trained in five different aircraft maintenance courses, according to Wreckhorst in his book. Eventually missiles were brought on to the base for launch training and then came the news that the base would indeed be closed in 1993 ending the training from the little base in the big cornfields.
Bessie Coleman
Honors Project; Article 3
Kelley Heaney

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This is the story a woman who lived before her time, doing things that women weren’t supposed to be able to do. The fact that she was black made the struggle to break out of the stereotypes of women in the 1920’s that much more difficult. At that time, American women were expected to stay home to take care of the children and the house. Skirts and hair were still worn long, but things were changing and some women wanted to break the molds. This was the age of flappers, hair bobs, race riots, and prohibition. It was also the early years of aviation, during which planes were still built out of wood with open cockpits and few safety features.

World War I had done a great deal to advance plane manufacturing, particularly with the JN-4, also known as a “Jenny.” This was a two seat, bi-plane, which means it had two sets of horizontal wings coming off the body. According to the website thepaperairplanecompany.com, “The plane’s slow speed and stability made it ideal for stunt flying and aerobatic displays. Some were still flying into the 1930s.” Many returning war pilots started performing for large crowds in air shows, doing daring stunt flying and even wing walking. Some daredevils dangled under the plane by a rope in their mouth. “It was a dangerous life,” reads wingsoverkansas.com.”Struts broke into pieces, engines failed, wing fabric ripped, and landing wheels collapsed. Quite a few would-be pilots never made a second flight.”

This was the world Bessie Coleman wanted to join. According to centennialofflight.gov, she was of African American and mixed Native American heritage. Born in Texas, in 1892, to sharecroppers, she was the tenth of thirteen children. In 1901, her father left the family to return to Indian Territory (Oklahoma), shortly after which her older brothers also left, leaving her mother with four daughters under the age of nine, according to website lkwdipl.org. As the oldest of the four, Bessie helped with the girls and the household chores while her mother worked as a cook and housekeeper. The young girl could read and write and was good at math. She read many books about successful African American people like Harriet Tubman and Booker T. Washington and helped with the bookkeeping for the family’s finances.

Somehow, she managed to finish high school while caring for her sisters, and helping her mother earn money taking in laundry and picking cotton, saving what she could. She managed to attend one semester of college with her savings, reads centennialofflight.gov. In 1915, she joined her brothers in Chicago. According to PBS.org, one brother, John, a WWI veteran, would taunt her about how much better French women were than American women, saying that they could even fly airplanes. In fact, the first woman in the world to achieve a pilot’s license was a French baroness.

Coleman, tired of listening to the taunts of her brother, applied to aviation schools in the United States, and was turned down by all because she was a black woman. White, American women had been able to achieve a license, the first being Harriet Quimby, in 1911, at an aviation school in New York. Coleman, working as a manicurist at Chicago’s White Sox Barbershop, became acquainted with many wealthy black men, including Robert Abbott, founder of the popular black newspaper, the Chicago Defender.

Robert Abbott was one of the only self-made black millionaires in the States during the 1920’s. “Abbott, captivated by the thought of a black woman pilot, did some
investigating for Coleman and found that the French still possessed a kind of ‘aeromania’ and were more liberal in their attitudes toward women and ‘people of color,’” avows website wingoverkansas.com. He and some of his friends helped Bessie to pay for French lessons. Bessie also worked hard saving money to help with the expenses giving up her job as a manicurist and taking a better paying position as a chili parlor manager.

In November, 1920, Coleman boarded a ship bound for France where she was signed up to take a 10 month flying course. “The only non-Caucasian student in her class, she was taught in a 27-foot biplane that was known to fail frequently, sometimes in the air,” according to PBS.org. She finished the course in seven months to become the first African American person to attain a pilot’s license. But, she soon realized that the only way to make any money as a pilot would be to do stunt flying such as loop the loops and other exciting and dangerous antics.

Barnstormers and flying circuses were the place for aviators to shine, performing many death defying feats. Coleman returned to France to take advanced lessons in aerobatics after once again checking American schools and being rejected. Upon her return to the States, in August, 1922, Coleman saw that she needed to create publicity about her flying. “She created an exciting image of herself with a military style uniform and an eloquence that belied her background,” maintains website BessieColeman.com.

First performing in September 1922, Coleman traveled the nation, becoming well known by giving exhibitions, flight lessons, and lectures. Although something of a celebrity, the flying shows were not generating the kind of money she needed to buy a reliable plane or produce a living. She tried to raise money by working at other various jobs, such as hairdressing, acting and giving flying lessons. Unfortunately, during her first lesson, the plane crashed and she spent months in the hospital recovering from injuries. She also gave lectures to encourage others, especially black women, to pursue their dreams and to learn to fly. She also revealed a goal of opening her own aviation school to train black pilots. This was not to be. Often known now as “Queen Bess,” she did try to use her celebrity status to instigate a change in race relations by insisting that the main gate at her shows not be segregated, so that blacks and whites were admitted equally.

While preparing for a 1926 show in Jacksonville, FL, where she was to be the star attraction, she was peering over the side of the plane’s open cockpit, surveying the ground below in preparation for her parachute jump in the area. Due to the fact that she was too small to see properly, she had unfastened her seat belt for a better view. With her mechanic flying, the plane suddenly accelerated and flipped over. It was later determined that a wrench had shifted and become stuck in the gear control box causing the problem. When the plane flipped Coleman, of course, fell to her death. The plane crashed nearby also killing the mechanic.

She had been flying for five years and during that time had become an inspiration to many. According to BessieColeman.com, three services were held for her, one in Jacksonville, Orlando and finally in Chicago. The Chicago memorial service, before the arrival of her body, was attended by 5000 mourners. When the coffin arrived, 10,000 people filed past it and thousands more attended the actual funeral. She was buried at
Lincoln Cemetery in Chicago.

The biggest honors were yet to come for the young black woman who, according to lkwdpl.org, always dreamed of “amounting to something.” In 1929, Lt. William J. Powell founded the Bessie Coleman Aero Club, an aviation school in Los Angeles. He also wrote a book, *Black Wings*, which he dedicated to her in 1934. The Challenger Pilots Association of Chicago, Chicago’s first black flying club, began an annual flyover on the anniversary of her death in 1931. In 1978, Chicago region women pilots founded the Bessie Coleman Aviators Club. A road near the O’Hare Airport in Chicago was renamed Bessie Coleman Drive in 1990 and May 2 declared Bessie Coleman day in 1992. The US Postal Department in 1995 issued a Bessie Coleman stamp and in 2000 she was inducted into the Texas Aviation Hall of Fame. The National Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton, Ohio, inducted her in 2006.
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