



Preparing "The Answer" Cabinaire for the endurance flight, June 1929. Viola Gentry stands by as Charles Parkhurst attends the chamois strained gasoline. Center is Paul Clough, now an American Air Lines Captain. (Author photo)

FLYING LIFE of VIOLA GENTRY

By H. GLENN BUFFINGTON

The refueling endurance flight of the Fokker tri-motor, "Question Mark," by the Army Air Corps, ushered in the year 1929 and unleashed a rash of record flight attempts during the following months. One of the more ardent exponents of such flying on the East Coast was the veteran pilot Viola Gentry.

Viola had already established the first non-refueling endurance record for women, December 20, 1928, by staying aloft 8 hrs. 6 min. 37 sec. over Roosevelt Field, New York. She used the Siemens-Halske powered Travel Air bi-plane loaned to her by Grace Lyon, another New York pilot. It was only natural for Miss Gentry to seek further laurels in the refueling flight field.

Born June 13, 1900 in Gentry, Rockingham County, North Carolina, Viola first became interested in aviation when she saw Lieut. Omar Locklear land a plane on top of the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco during WWI. In her own words, "That did it." However, it was 1924 before she learned to fly at the old Glenn Curtiss Field on Long Island, soloed at Roosevelt Field in 1925, and ac-

quired Federation Aeronautique International license #6530, September 16, 1925. Her Department of Commerce license #1822 was dated March 1, 1926. On the 14th of that month, she followed the example of some of the era's stunt pilots and flew under the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, which rated some publicity and an official reprimand. Viola claimed Danville, Virginia, as her home port while her father lived there.

After the endurance flying fever took over, Miss Gentry teamed with Charles Parkhurst, one of the disqualified Dole Derby entries. They used a Paramount "Cabinaire" closed bi-plane, 125 h.p. Warner engine, in their record attempt. The plane was appropriately christened "The Answer." It was equipped with a 72 gal. fuel tank under the seat, in addition to two 21 gal. wing tanks. They took off from Roosevelt Field shortly before noon, June 21, 1929, and were to be refueled by Emil Burgin in the Acosta Aircraft Corp. Fokker monoplane. However, the flight was cut short at nine o'clock that evening, when they were unable to make contact with

the refueling plane.

Undaunted, Viola made a second attempt June 27, again in "The Answer," and this time with Jack Ashcraft, a former member of the Gates Flying Circus. They were to be refueled by Paul Dixon and Clyde Kincaid of Hartford, Connecticut, in a Standard bi-plane. A large crowd, out to see "The Three Musketeers" aloft on a similar attempt, witnessed the takeoff at 8:49 p.m. (The Bellanca, "The Three Musketeers," was manned by Martin and Marguerite Jensen and William Ulbrich, and ended during the seventieth hour of flight.) The flight of "The Answer" came to an abrupt ending in the early morning fog, during the ninth hour. They ran short of fuel and the support aircraft was unable to take off. During the forced landing, the Cabinair hit a treetop and plunged nose-first into the ground in a nursery on the Jerico Turnpike, in Old Westbury, about a mile from Roosevelt Field. Ashcraft was killed outright and Viola was severely injured. Surgeons reported her chances of recovery as "uncertain" and revealed that a blood transfusion had been necessary. However, the plucky flier did make a comeback, after months of recuperation, and continued to be identified with endurance flying.

One of the first public appearances by Miss Gentry, after the accident, was at the organizational meeting of the Ninety-Nines, November 2, 1929. Twenty-six pilots met at Curtiss Field, Valley Stream, Long Island, and Viola was presented with a huge bouquet of chrysanthemums by the other women pilots at this historic meeting.

Viola eased back into the annals of endurance flying by managing the Louise Thaden-Frances Marsalis record attempt in August of 1932. They established a new record of 196 hrs. 5 min. in a Curtiss Thrush J-6, NR9142, over Long Island. Viola teamed with Frances Marsalis in the same Curtiss Thrush, December 1933 at Miami, Florida, and hoped to set an even higher record. M. R. Colee was the Managing Director. They dubbed the plane "Outdoor Girl;" headquartered at The Alcazar Hotel, and planned to spend the Holiday Season aloft. However Viola was taken ill and was hospitalized shortly before the proposed takeoff. Helen Richey replaced her and the subsequent flight set a new women's record of 9 days, 21 hours, 42 min. which stands today.

A correspondence inquiry by the author in 1934 divulged that Viola had approximately 600 hours solo flight time and she held a Restricted Private License because of the 1929 accident. She was using a Challenger-powered Curtiss Robin for the most part and preferred cross-country racing to closed course. Her most thrilling flying incident, at that time, occurred during a forced landing at the State Institution at Wooster, Massachusetts, on a flight to Boston. She landed in a hay stack and had to be identified before leaving the premises.

Viola flew an OX-Waco in the second annual Annette Gipson Trophy Race, June 4, 1933, at Floyd Bennett Field, and she reported, "I flew high, wide and handsome and came in last. Was presented with the Birdman Trophy which represents Courage and Sportsmanship." This particular race was a 40 mile, two-lap handicap event and had 22 entries. Henrietta Sumner finished first in a Travel Air, Frances Marsalis second in a Waco, Jessamine Goddard third in a Monocoupe and Mary Moore Sansom fourth in a Fleet. Laura Ingalls turned in the best speed (180 mph) with her Lockheed Air Express, but took ninth place because of the handicapping.

Being a dedicated spokeswoman for general aviation, with the emphasis on safety of flight, Viola Gentry has made it a habit to speak to youth groups, aviation meetings, and others. Since 1960, Viola has been working with Felicity Burnelli, founder of the Medal-of-the-Month Foundation (in memory of her brother, Vincent J. Burnelli, pioneer aircraft designer). These commemorative bronze plaques are presented at intervals honoring some of the prominent pioneers in the aviation field.

Miss Gentry is a current member of the OX-5 Club, Silver Wings, Long Island Early Fliers and the Roosevelt Field Group. She is a charter member and former Vice-President of the Somen's International Association of Aeronautics. She is a charter and life member of the Ninety-Nines and entered the 14th AWTAR (All Woman Transcontinental Air Race) in 1960 with Myrtle Thompson Cagle of Greenwood, S.C. They flew a Ryan Navion B and the course was from Torrance, California to Wilmington, Delaware. The following year, Miss Gentry flew the AWTAR with Shirley Marshall of Tucson, Arizona, in a Piper Tri-Pacer from San Diego, California to Atlantic City, New Jersey. Both races were flown under the sponsorship of the Sea Spray Inn, East Hampton, Long Island, with which Viola was associated at that time.

In the earlier years, Miss Gentry was affiliated with various restaurants and became known as the "Flying Cashier." More recently, she has had hostess staff assignments which enable her to journey around the country. The summer of 1966 found her at the Grand Hotel, Mackinac Island, Michigan, and the winter of that year at the Bellevue-Biltmore, Clearwater, Florida.

Humanitarian Viola Gentry takes delight, these days, in advocating her love for life and flying whenever possible. She has been awarded the Lady Drummond Hay WIAA Trophy and, also, the Tiny Broderick-OX-5 Award for her ability to promote flying. She has acted as official observer of numerous international record flights, at both Roosevelt and Bennett Fields. Her four-decade flight association is an enviable record--a true pioneer pilot.

Addendum:

In the summer of 1967, Viola advised that through the kindness of George Haddaway, "Flight Magazine," she had been offered a wonderful position, an appointment by the Humanities Research Center as a Consultant to the History of Aviation Collection at the University of Texas, Austin, Texas. She thrilled to the assignment and said, "In my forty years of aviation, this is my greatest thrill, to know that, for a few years, I will be calling on old and new friends for historical material."

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