

High Flying Fashion!

The Evolution of Flight Apparel for Pioneering Women Pilots

By Barbara Schultz



Mrs. Hart O. Berg – first American woman to fly in an airplane. Note the rope around her skirt. (ctie.monash.edu.au image)



Bessica Raiche and her husband built an airplane in their living room. She determined after her first solo flight on September 16, 1910, that a skirt had no place in the cockpit. (wikimedia commons)

“Although flying was a fashionable sport, it was still regarded as something very unusual and a sign of bravado for a woman to become a pilot.”¹

Following the Wright brothers’ successful 1903 launch of an aircraft, aviation was endowed with seemingly endless possibilities. Enthusiasts began constructing airplanes and acquiring powerplants. Male pilots donned their flying suits with bravado, amazing the public in fragile linen and wood craft. They were awarded hero status; women swooned whenever they chanced to be in their presence.

But what about the women – those who defied stereotypes and earned the right to operate the controls of an airplane? The underlying problem the women faced was that aviation provided no role for them in either the cockpit or in any other related capacity. Women as airplane passengers was inconceivable. The passing of time, however, would eventually afford women acceptance in the world of aviation, albeit limited. In the interim, it would be quite an adventure as they explored potential options for appropriate flying attire that was morally acceptable. Pants were out of the question although women working in factories or on ranches in the late 1800s were often seen wearing them.

According to Sherwood Harris, fashion restrictions made it difficult for women pilots to find suitable clothing.

“For centuries women’s fashions seemingly had been designed to prevent them from stepping out of their limited lives and into more active competition with their men. At the turn of the century, skirts dragged the

floor, corsets contorted the female figure into grotesque S-curves and exaggerated hourglass shapes, and frills and ruffles weighted everything down and lent the costumes of the period a distinctly over-decorated look. Only a few months before Harriet Quimby and Matilde Moisant learned to fly, a great breakthrough occurred. Skirts were raised enough to show off a well-turned ankle. But this radical – some thought it scandalous – development was far from the ideal costume for making a flight in the open cockpit planes of the time.”²

As women began participating in sports on a regular basis in the late 1800s, the need for practical clothing became apparent. Regulation clothing for the ladies competing at Wimbledon required long skirts and corsets. It’s no surprise that many fainted during a match. Straddling a bicycle in a gown measuring five yards at the hemline proved a daunting task at best. The first attempt to make ‘adjustments’ to women’s active wear occurred when parachuting became popular. The jumper, male or female was required to roll over on their back and thrust their legs upward to avoid a spinal injury. To maintain a semblance of propriety, British *Parachute Queen* Dolly Shepherd traded her skirt for a navy-blue knickerbocker suit with gold trim, long front-laced boots, and a high-peaked cap. The suit added an element of flair to her performance and, at the same time, preserved her dignity.³

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Ramonde de la Roche tied a string around her skirt to go aloft and set the woman's altitude record on July 1, 1919. (thisdayinaviation.com)



Ruth Law's pants were baggy but not voluminous. (All images are the author's unless otherwise noted.)



Dubbed the Flying School Girl, Katherine Stinson's pants appear to be much baggier than those of Ruth Law.

Mrs. Hart O. Berg, first American woman to fly in an airplane, secured her full skirt by having a rope wrapped around its bottom that allowed her to thoroughly enjoy her 1908 flight at Le Mans, France. While testing her home-built aircraft in 1910, Bessica Raiche, first American woman to make an intentional flight, quickly realized that wearing a skirt was a big mistake. The wind lifted it and hampered the safe control of the plane. Her alternative to skirts was riding breeches until she had leather pants, a jacket, and a helmet made. That same year, Ramonde de la Roche (born Elise Deroche), the first woman to receive a pilot's license, tied a string around her skirt, topped by a white aviator's sweater.⁴

Skirts were gradually replaced with an assortment of pants as clothing restrictions for women continued to relax. Before the transition to knickers and jodhpurs, the ladies often wore men's pants tucked into high-top boots. Pioneering aviatrixes Ruth Law and Katherine Stinson wore extremely baggy pants secured by their boots. When women began to abandon riding sidesaddle to ride astride, jodhpurs became popular. A South Asian style of pant, jodhpurs were snug fitting from the knee to the ankle, flaring at the hip to allow for comfort while sitting in the saddle – or cockpit. They also proved to be as functional



Harriet Quimby chose to have a custom flying suit made by an experienced tailor. The vivid color of her 'flying dress' attracted a great deal of attention.

as knickers when lacing up high top boots. Headgear was delegated to the preference of the aviatrix. This ranged from an automobile cap, functional hood, beret, or knit cap.

Harriet Quimby, the first American woman to receive a pilot's license and consistent contributor to *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, stated in a 1911 article: *If a woman wants to fly, first of all she must, of course, abandon skirts and don a knickerbocker uniform.*⁵

With that being said, Harriet enlisted the help of the American Tailors' Association President Alexander M. Greaux to design a flying costume for her. This resulted in a purple suit made of thick wool-backed satin with an attached hood but without a lining. The walking skirt could be converted into knickers by closing the rows of buttons on the inside seams. The blouse sleeves were cut with long shoulder seams and fastened under the arm. The rest of Harriet's flying ensemble included high-laced

leather boots, uniquely styled goggles, and her ever-present earrings. During her 1912 record-setting flight across the English Channel, she wore a woolen coat and raincoat over her flying dress and secured a hot water bottle inside the coats for added warmth. Some references note she wore two sets of long underwear as well.⁶

Matilde Moisant, as petite as Quimby, reflected on fashions for flying. “How shall we dress for flying? Simply, sensibly, with only two ideas uppermost in the planning of the outfit – material that will meet such cloud foes as rain and cold and a pattern that will give the woman who is operating the machine freedom of action and the chance for safe work. Aeroplaning does not call for frills.

“When I first began my lessons, I pulled over my shirt waist a regular mechanics suit of brown – a one-piece overall with long sleeves, high neck and buttons straight down the front. Rubber snaps held the trousers in about the ankles. Miss Harriet Quimby wore the same thing. I was so small I had to have my suit made, for the very smallest man’s size was too large for me. We kept on wearing these suits until we were graduate aviators and we had our licenses . . . But when we became regularly licensed aviators we found we had to create our own fashions . . . We had no present-day models or ancestral fashion books to which to turn for ideas. One thing I had determined upon, however, I would not wear the bloomer. At least, so I argued to myself, I would remain feminine even if I were about to indulge in a support heretofore considered wholly masculine.”⁷

Matilde lost no time in having an appropriate flying suit designed. “It was made of heavy Navy and Army cloth of brownish color. The suit is one piece, the upper half a bodice fashioned similarly to a well-tailored uniform and buttoned down one side. There are long, comfortable sleeves and a collar that buttons close about the throat. The lower half of the garment is made after the style of a man’s riding breeches – full about the top and tapering to fit in early about the knees.

“I went to the shops and selected a beautiful piece of gray corduroy. I had the tailor make a pair of bloomers to be carefully hidden by a short skirt of the corduroy, the bottom of the shirt-waist design to be fastened to the skirt band.” The next version of this outfit was made of soft, pliable



Matilde Moisant experimented with different flying suits until being satisfied with the design.



Blanche Stuart Scott, 'Tomboy of the Air,' made an accidental flight while 'grass-cutting' in September 6, 1910.



Belgian Hélène Dutrieu broke tradition and refused to wear a corset and end up with a whale bone through her chest.

leather. To accompany it, Matilde wore knee-high brown leather boots with brown pearl buttons and gauntlet gloves that matched the boots.⁸

Blanche Stuart Scott’s appearance proved to be the antithesis of Harriet and Matilde’s ‘delicate’ images. The press described Blanche, who made an unintentional flight on September 2, 1910, as a ‘robust’ woman. She wore bulky sweaters with long skirts and sported a soft leather helmet over her ample head of red hair. At one point, she designed a smooth satin jumpsuit to wear. If she was attempting to look ‘sleek,’ this was defeated when the layers of petticoats worn for warmth bulged clown-like around her thighs.⁹

A 1910 *Los Angeles Times* article described Belgian aviatrix Hélène Dutrieu’s flying apparel. It appears that the divided skirt or hidden bloomers were becoming popular. “Her drab-colored costume of cravenette (water-repellant) serge caught the feminine eye as she swung across the flying field. Her two-piece suit consists of a blouse and a divided skirt with a suggestion

of the harem. The two garments are joined by a black patent leather belt and a Norfolk jacket effect is obtained by an arrangement sewed on the upper part of the skirt that falls gracefully over the feet when she walks and with a button and strap secured around her ankles before she mounts her Farman biplane.” Reported immodestly was the fact that Dutrieu flew uncorseted, considered immoral, thoughtless and ‘promiscuous’ in the early 1900s. The Belgian aviatrix, however, had no intention of having a whalebone stab her through the chest if she made a hard landing. She compromised later by wearing a corset constructed without whalebone that would provide the necessary support in the event of a crash and satisfy her critics. Earthbound, Dutrieu loved to be noticed and was most often seen wearing a beautiful angora beret, culottes (invented by her friend, aviatrix Marie Marvingt), white leggings, and mousquetaire gloves.¹⁰



Only 4' 11", Margery Brown typically wore jodhpurs but here she is wearing short culottes.

A practical flying suit was developed in late 1916 by Sidney Cotton, a Royal Naval Air Service pilot. Cotton had been working on his own aircraft when a 'scramble' was called. Flying to the designated location in his dirty overalls for an hour or so, he landed and "found that, unlike his fellow pilots who were shivering from the cold, he was quite unaffected. Having thought through this effect, he realized that it was the oil and grease soaked into the overalls that had retained the body heat." Cotton then commissioned Robinson & Cleaver in London to construct a flying suit of his design that was named the Sidcot suit. The original one-piece suit consisted of three layers – a thin lining of fur, a layer of airproof silk, and an outside layer of light Burberry material. Its construction changed over the years but was regarded by pilots around the world as the most effective for operational use. It would be a mainstay until the majority of aircraft possessed airplanes closed cockpits.¹¹

Attempting record cross-country flights in very small aircraft resulted in women pilots packing an assortment of clothing. Lady Mary Heath (born Sophie Catherine Theresa Mary Peirce-Evans), the first pilot to fly an open-cockpit airplane from Cape Town to London, managed to pack an entire wardrobe in her tiny Avro *Avian* for the 1928 flight. The clothing inventory included six pairs of silk stockings, two silk day dresses, an evening dress, two blouses, a jersey and white flannel shirt, black satin shoes and tennis shoes but only one change of underclothing.

Aviatrix Margery Brown wrote that Lady Heath wore the most interesting ensemble of all her fellow pilots. It consisted of a black leather coat trimmed in pony skin, a pony skin helmet,

black leather gloves, and patent leather boots . . . In addition, you will see gauntlets of gold leather and blue velvet: breeches of orange and yellow watered silk; and a helmet of robin's egg blue lined with pale gray fur.¹²

Appearances were important to Lady Heath, who managed to change in mid-air so that she could emerge from her aircraft looking her best and claimed that flying was so safe that a woman could fly across Africa dressed in a Parisian frock and keeping her nose powdered all the way.¹³

Evening attire was essential for pilots embarking on cross-country flights. Upon landing, they were always met by dignitaries and expected to be the center of attention at social evenings. Jessie Keith *Chubbie* Miller, before departing from London en route to Australia, did not plan to include an evening dress until a sponsor pointed out that she would be sorely disappointed if she didn't take one. On his advice, she packed a frilly black chiffon gown and matching slippers in her suitcase.

French Viscountess Violette de Sibour made room for 14 pounds of clothing and toilet articles in a de Havilland Gypsy when she and her husband embarked on a round-the-world flight in 1928. Along with two cameras, she packed one sport suit, sleeveless summer frock and wide-brimmed hat, black evening dress and shawl, two pairs of shoes, one pair of silver slippers, two complete sets of lingerie, and a half dozen pairs of silk stockings. Violette, the daughter of Selfridge Department Store owner Harry Gordon Selfridge Jr., included clothing designed by the best couturiers as did Lady Heath.¹⁴

Although there were a very limited number of women aviators in the 1920s and



American Violette de Sibour in man's pants and fur-lined flying cap.



Abercrombie flying suit circa 1929.

1930s, less than one-thirtieth of all pilots, they were becoming more than just *curiosities*. They snubbed the constraints set by society and symbolized courage, freedom and romance for earthbound women. This can be attributed, in most part, to Amelia Earhart's 1928 Atlantic flight as a passenger aboard the Fokker *Friendship*. She instantly attained status as an American icon and, as Joseph Corn so aptly wrote, she personified the ideal of so many women of the era – liberated yet feminine women. That same year, London's renown Harrods Department Store along with Selfridges and Abercrombie & Fitch took advantage of the growing popularity for women pilots by featuring several styles of ladies' flying suits. Harrod's expensive ensembles included leather jodhpur-style jumpsuits with fitted legs and zip fronts; flying suits with zip front and zips from the ankles to the knees, and three-quarter length leather jackets. All garments were accompanied by stylish gloves, helmets, and goggles.¹⁵

Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli designed a woman's flight suit in 1928, an adaptation of the Sidcot suit worn by Charles Lindbergh on his 1927 solo Atlantic flight. The plain linen weave overalls, trimmed with patent-leather wing like inserts and cuffs, were snug at the ankles. The wrists, pockets and neck all possessed zipper fastenings. The overalls were to be worn over a simple jersey suit, which upon landing would leave the pilot smartly dressed after removing the overalls. According to Prudence Black, Schiaparelli "sought the company of and designed for the quintessential modern woman. Who is this quintessential young modern woman? I would suggest that it was the aviatrix who perhaps symbolized more than anyone else, the kind of modernist subject it was now possible to be."¹⁶

Schiaparelli formed close relationships with Amelia Earhart and Amy Johnson. The designer was invited by Earhart to the Putnam's Rye, N.Y., home in February 1933. Earhart



Amy Johnson sports a couture fur-lined long coat.



Elinor Smith was as photogenic as Earhart. She is colorized for a California orange ad.



Earhart publicity photo in standard aviatrix flying attire – boots, jodhpurs, white shirt, & tie - taken before her 1928 flight in the Friendship.

was in the process of creating her own fashion line and sought Schiaparelli's advice. As Earhart's husband George Putnam recalled, "I remember a weekend when Elsa Schiaparelli came to Rye and the atmosphere buzzed with talk about functional clothes. Schiaparelli, who has so often taken her own themes from the elements of nature, concurred in the common sense of relating clothes for active living to the feeling and materials of flying, making them long-lined, slim, unadorned, and workmanlike. And

her own gadgeteer's soul found a true delight in AE's adaptations from aviation to clothes; silver screws used to fasten up a flannel dress; miniature oil cups for buttons; parachute silk stitched as a parachute is stitched for shirts and she loved Amelia's idea of a forthright approach to shirt tails." Black also stated that AE designed a flying suit with a zipper back flap that made it possible for the women pilots to relieve themselves in the air.¹⁷

In 1934, U. S. Rubber financed and promoted Earhart's line of 25 separate outfits constructed with Lastex, the "miracle yarn that makes things fit." This included hats manufactured by Stetson and, as mentioned above, shirts with tails. Earhart stated the following to the press. "I've even seen eyebrows raised when I mention shirt

tails. But plenty of women in their mighty exasperation have composed hymns of hate for what cannot be called anything else but a shirt tail, especially when it comes loose! I made my clothes to have good long shirt tails that wouldn't come loose no matter if the wearer took time to stand on her head."¹⁸

Earhart's clothing line began when Macy's Vice President Paul Hollister suggested the following to her. "Why don't you create some flying suits for lady flyers . . . which are practical but at the same time becoming?" Earhart did just that. The



Kathryn Hepburn was cast as an aviatrix in the 1933 Christopher Strong movie. (RKO Pictures)



Marlene Dietrich played a spy in the 1931 film Dishonored.

Ninety-Nines, an international organization of women pilots that Earhart helped found, would offer her two-piece gabardine flying coveralls to its membership in 1934. The January 15, 1934, issue of *Vogue* featured her wearing the coveralls.

Arnold, Constable & Company, located in Paris and New York, designed one of the many flight suits worn by Amelia Earhart. On display in the Smithsonian's William H. Gross Stamp Gallery, it was purportedly one of the first flight suits made specifically for women and worn during at least one of Earhart's Atlantic crossings. The brown leather flight suit was fully lined with orange, red, and brown plaid flannel to provide adequate insulation from the elements. A snap fur collar protected against drafts. A simpler black cotton, one-piece suit with zip-up front was also worn by Earhart. An avid promoter of aviation, she illustrated that flying could be accomplished in everyday wear by donning a skirt and close-fitting hat on many of her promotional or speaking trips.

Pioneering aviatrix Amy Johnson formed a fashion alliance with Schiaparelli in the mid-1930s. Prior to that, she wore shirts, a leather jacket, and jodhpurs. For her 1930 London to Australia flight she chose green coveralls to match her Gypsy Moth, declaring green her lucky color. She switched to borrowed khaki shorts plus shoes and socks upon her arrival in Baghdad due to boiling temperatures.¹⁹

Babington Smith, one of many who have written about Johnson, describes her arrival at Seletar Aerodrome Singapore. "With an oil-covered face, men's khaki shorts, men's stockings,

much oil stained heavy brogue shoes, and a drill jacket, under which her long-sleeved purple blouse was pinned at her throat by her mother's swastika brooch."²⁰

Images from Amy's 1932 flight from London to South Africa show her wearing a fur collared Sidcot suit over riding breeches and a mannish shirt and pullover. The purpose of the high collar was to protect her from the sun but when Amy came to close to having a heat stroke, she discarded it. In April 1936, Amy abandoned the Sidcot suit for her second record flight to South Africa. To match her pale blue Percival Gull, she chose a mist-blue wool suit with a divided skirt and matching overcoat designed for her by Schiaparelli. During a refueling stop on the northern edge of the Sahara (Columb B  char) Amy changed into a lighter cream silk toile suit, again with a divided skirt, and a blouse printed with a pattern of postage stamps. One of Schiaparelli's famous mesh snoods covered her hair for the journey.²¹

In addition to couture designers and department stores, the movie industry played a major role contributing to the popularity of flying apparel by featuring famous actresses in films dressed in striking costumes. Marlene Dietrich, playing a spy in Paramount's 1931 film *Dishonored*, was mysterious yet stunning in her flying suit. According to Karla Jay, "Dietrich sports a thick, shiny, unwrinkled black leather jumpsuit with some greasy spots of oil around and below the front pocket. A large cowl-like button-down collar adds a feminine touch." Katherine Hepburn played an aviatrix in the 1933 *Christopher Strong* film. In one scene, she is seen climbing into a plane's cockpit in a 'long,

elegant leather trench coat with jodhpurs visible underneath.” A stylish beret and white gloves completed the outfit.²²

Few women pilots of the 1920s and 1930s could afford designer garments. As a result, the standard flying clothing consisted of a combination of overalls, leather coats, either jodhpurs, knickers or shorts, white shirt and tie. Most changed into shorts when flying in extreme heat. Australian Jessie Keith Chubbie Miller became famous for her ever-present shorts that created a new fashion trend for women on Australia’s east coast beaches. Hotels in the vicinity reluctantly changed their policy to allow shorts to be worn by women indoors for dining.²³

The rest of Chubbie’s flying outfit consisted of a white linen shirt, brown golf stockings and brown kid shoes. During the 1930s Ford tour, she substituted white kid jodhpurs for her shorts. The rest of her attire - white kid jacket with lamb’s wool, white silk shirt with black tie and matching white leather helmet - all matched her white Fairchild. Chubbie’s attitude about pants, “Why should one not dress appropriately. Pants, for instance, are best; just imagine how skirts catch and get in the way.”²⁴

British aviatrix Honorable Mrs. Victor Bruce (Mary) was wearing shorts when she crashed in the Arabian Desert. When the Baluchi tribesmen came to her aid, they discovered that she was a woman – with bare arms, legs and head. This triggered a great deal of shouting and gesturing by the tribesmen. Understanding the situation she was in, Mary put on pajamas but refused to cover her face and head.²⁵

The first woman to fly from Australia to London, Lores Bonney, was fortunate to have a husband who encouraged her to challenge records. He also presented her with a custom-made flying suit. Owner of Bonney & Clarke Pty Ltd., which manufactured leather goods, Harold Bonney had a unique suede suit made for her to wear for the 1933 record flight. It undoubtedly protected her from cold weather experienced while flying her de Havilland Moth. Lores traded the suede suit for brown linen shorts, short socks and light sandals in tropical areas.²⁶

But – not all men were as accepting of women pilots



Lores Bonney's suede flight suit made by her husband's company which she wore on her flight from Australia to England. (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS), Sydney)



Australian aerobatic pilot Joan Taubman had a Sidcot style suit made for her. It was double breasted with a detachable fur collar. The cuffs of the pants had straps and buckles to prevent the wind blowing up the legs. (MAAS)

wearing pants. The following narrative reflects the description given by the press when the participants of the 1929 Women’s National Air Race arrived in Cleveland. Columnists’ reactions to women participating in racing events focused more on their clothing than their accomplishments. “Women don’t look good in pants” seemed to be the consensus. *Aero Digest* contributor Cy Caldwell went further, “I send out an anguished call for help to the dressmakers and possibly pants-makers of America. Come to the aid of these distressed damsels! Fix them, somehow, anyhow! Get them out of that rigging, borrowed from us men. And get them into something, no matter what, that will leave them their girlish charm, their feminine allure, and

yet not get caught in the propeller!”²⁷

Aero Digest founder Frank Tichenor added to Caldwell’s laments. “The girls and their rigs – I hear they spent all their prize money on new pants. Talk about the emancipation of women . . . What we’ve got now is the *epantsipation* of flying American womanhood.”²⁸

It’s apparent that there was immense pressure from the press for women pilots to remain *ladylike*. Even Earhart was chastised after her 1928 flight in the *Friendship*. The *New York Sun* ran an article entitled *Miss Earhart Spurns Fashion*. Another column ran this title, *Fashions and Clothes Play No Part in the Life of AE*. “Fashions – either air or earth – have no appeal to Amelia Earhart. Clothes she regards as matter-of-fact necessity, like food. Further, flying is a perfectly natural thing in her opinion and requires no special togs; a dress is as good air equipment as trousers. So, when the Boston social worker prepared to hop across the Atlantic she even had to borrow her flying clothes. Brown trousers, a silk shirt, a turtle-necked sweater, and an old flying coat.”

Earhart’s husband George Putnam criticized his wife for her lack of taste when it came to her wardrobe, stating that she was satisfied to wear her comfortably worn flying clothes. Her successful involvement with *Cosmopolitan* seemingly changed her position on fashion. She began to dress more



Earhart flying coat displayed at the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming. (Buffalo Bill Center of the West Museum, 1.69.2200)



Earhart cotton flight suit, (National Air & Space Museum, A19750817000CR1)



Leather flying suit front – worn during at least one of Atlantic crossings, SI, NPM-0-279483-3h) (National Postal Museum, SI, NPM-0-279483-3b)



Ruth Nichols posed for this painting in her purple flight suit. (Ninety-Nines Museum of Women Pilots)

stylishly and take an avid interest in “trendy” flying attire. She and Lady Mary Heath sponsored a comprehensive exhibit featuring women’s flying garments at New York’s 1929 Aviation Show. In 1934, the *New York Sun* heralded Earhart as the “smartest dressed aviator.”

A few women pilots made bold and colorful statements with their flying suits. Ruth Nichols, a saleswoman for the Fairchild Company, prepared for a solo Atlantic hop in 1932 by having a purple leather flying suit and helmet made. Fay Gillis designed flying suits in colors – Alice blue and orange rajah, or printed cotton pique in any desired color or material. Big pockets were provided to hold necessary flight supplies. Others designed creative flying suits. Edith Foltz constructed an imaginative garment in 1931. It was made of a blouse, knickerbockers and a skirt. The skirt was designed to be pulled over the shoulders to make a blouse while flying. Upon landing, the over-blouse would be put back down into a skirt. It holds the U.S. patent number 2080814.²⁹

Australian Nancy Bird (Walton) started flying in 1933 as a 17-year-old. In her biography, she described this as a time when women were not wearing trousers so she had to make them herself. They were a cross between knickerbockers and plus-fours - baggy knickers reaching below the knee. She wore these trousers with a shirt, tie and jumper. A pair of ski socks and brogues along with a leather coat, goggles, a flying helmet and huge fur lined gloves made up the rest of her flying apparel. Nancy also wore KingGee overalls for flights, replacing the buttons with bright red ones to make the outfit a little more feminine. Summer head gear in Australia and other hot areas



Edith Foltz took creativity to a new level with her Foltz-up.



Ruth Elder was often seen with patterned socks, white shirt, tie, and straight pants.

was a topee – a light weight helm-shaped hat made of pith or cork.³⁰

According to Norma Martyn, the role of the aviatrix “was helping to lead women and the world into the future.” There is no doubt that they accomplished this despite being met by two major challenges. One was acceptance as competent pilots – equal to their male counterparts. Winning races, setting records and testing new aircraft most certainly authenticated their piloting skills. The second challenge was developing morally appropriate attire in which to fly. This task resulted in many successful and unique solutions. Having the public accept the women pilots wearing pants away from the field, however, continued to be troublesome throughout

the 1930s. In 1934, Pancho Barnes’ Women’s Air Reserve members were arrested in New York City for wearing uniform pants. The city’s code had been violated! Only when their sponsors cleared the matter up with the police were the women free to go about their business.³¹

In summary, through their own ingenuity and independence, women pilots set the foundation for the ‘modern’ women not only in apparel but in the skies, surmounting challenges and creating new possibilities. ➔



Australian Nancy Bird Walton stated that she had to make her own pants when she started flying in 1933.



By the 1930s, women pilots were well on their way to creating and adapting apparel that was appropriate in the cockpit as this group demonstrates. Participating in a fund raiser in 1932 for Bellevue Hospital were, left to right, Laurel Sharpless, Laura Ingalls, Flo Scheer, Annette Gibson, Viola Gentry, Jessamine Goddard, Mrs. John T. Reemey, & Mrs. Evelyn de Seversky. Note the knotted pants on Mrs. Reemey.

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About the Author

Barbara Schultz is an accomplished aviation historian/author/speaker. She has written six aviation history books, several journal articles, and participated in documentaries and podcasts. A pilot, she owns a 1960 Cessna 150 and lives with her husband on their own airport – Little Buttes Antique Airport.