

Pioneering American Women Glider Pilots

By Barbara Schultz



Maxine Dunlap just became the first woman to receive a glider license. (San Francisco Public Library)



Soaring over the Ocean Beach sand dunes. (San Francisco Public Library)

Maxine Dunlap 1908–1942

A resident of Pleasanton, Calif., Maxine Dunlap earned private pilot license #5894 in April 1928. She quickly accumulated 60 hours in the air before setting her sights on motorless flight. Following three weeks of lessons, Maxine entered the first glider contest held by the California Gliders Association on April 29, 1929. The event took place over the Ocean Beach sand dunes near San Francisco. Intending to qualify for a glider rating, she flew a Ferguson glider similar to a German training craft. She traveled 990 feet while staying aloft for 50 seconds. This exceeded the minimum of 30 seconds to receive a Class 3 glider license and eclipsed Amelia Earhart's glider flight of 17 seconds. The U.S. Department of Commerce awarded her glider certificate number 8. She became the first American woman to obtain a glider pilot license of any kind. Even though she was airborne for less than a minute, Maxine successfully executed two S curves and most important, a smooth landing.

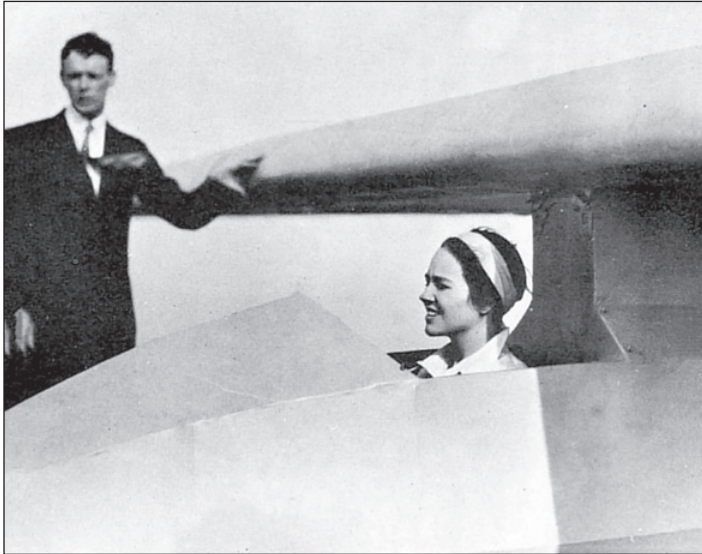
In March 1930, Maxine became president of the Bay Region California Gliding Club and supported competitions in the area. She also continued flying motor-powered aircraft. Her performances in the many air races across the country were notable. In 1935, she set a new 100-km world's record for women for light airplanes in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Her top speed was 76.799 mph in Spartan's first monoplane, a C2-60.

In 1927, a wave of enthusiasm for aviation spread around the world. Smitten with *Lindberghitis*, citizens began a quest "to take to the skies." Youngsters built and flew balsa wood gliders. Men resurrected WWI aircraft or constructed aircraft in their backyards. Women discovered that flying was one sport that provided a sense of freedom and confidence from societal constraints. As Joseph Corn stated in his book, *The Winged Gospel*, "As pilots, women experienced feelings of strength, mastery and confidence which, particularly at a time when Victorian norms still rendered all strenuous effort and most activity by women suspect, seemed delicious indeed."

A small handful of extraordinary women overcame male prejudice and paved the way for a generation of competent and accomplished pilots. They effectively navigated both motorized aircraft and gliders. This article focuses on the pioneering American women glider pilots.

Maxine's second husband, Coca-Cola executive and All-American tackle, Joseph J. Bennett Jr., provided the financial support necessary for his wife to continue flying. She purchased a 260-hp Stinson Gull Wing and became the family's capable pilot. A Ninety-Nine's newsletter related an amusing incident in her flying career when she made a forced landing in a rose garden. No damage was done, but a crowd quickly gathered. From the multitude of on-lookers a masculine voice drawled, "Now isn't that just like a woman – landing on a bed of roses."¹

Anne Lindbergh
1906-2001



Charles Lindbergh giving Anne last minute instructions before being launched. (Jeff Byard collection)

In 1930, both Charles and Anne Lindbergh switched from powered flight to motorless flight. They traveled to San Diego, the *Air Capitol of the West*, to take lessons from Hawley Bowlus, a former construction superintendent for the *Spirit of St. Louis*. He now operated the successful Bowlus Glider School and possessed a stellar reputation as a glider designer and instructor. Nine of the first ten licensed glider pilots in the United States were graduates of his school.

Charles successfully earned his first class glider license as Anne intently observed the process. Then, it was her turn. On January 29, 1930, she completed the primary course with 10 short flights in *Tillie the Toiler* (598M) and was ready for her solo flight. It was made from Mt. Soledad, an 800 foot promontory north of San Diego. A four-man crew manning ropes attached to the nose of the blue and silver Bowlus Baby Albatross catapulted her into the air. She sailed west toward the ocean and landed six minutes later in a field beside the State highway. The flight qualified her for a Class 1 glider license, the first American woman to do so. She described her first soaring adventure in her book, *Hour of Gold, Hour of Lead*.

"When we got up to the top of the hill, the sail plane perched on the edge, the nice little green fields below – it felt terrific. All the men were ready to pull at the elastic cord and shoot me off. Camera men all set and ready for a show (taking it as a matter of course). Hawley pacing around nervously, giving me futile last minute instructions. (I knew no matter what he told me, I would not remember his words and when I got in the air would act instinctively, that was what Charles was counting on and what gave me confidence. As soon as I got into the air, it felt natural and the controls were obedient and it was familiar after the Fledgling.

"Just the same, when I got into the cockpit and all the people stood around and C. said, 'All set?' And Hawley said, 'All set?' To the men on the ropes, I felt like a lamb about to be sacrificed. . . . Then I thought, Well, it's just one of my flying dreams. The mountain is just the same, steep, way down, and you (just) flap and glide off.' Then the men started running, pulling the rope. I heard the keel scrape and I was off! In a second.

"Oh, the relief of getting off? It was quiet and the ship rose steadily. I was not frightened now; there was plenty of time to think; the ship responded easily to the controls. And it was so delicious, so still. I picked my route . . . along one hill, across to another, and down into a green field – a very conservative route. I did very little soaring because I felt rather timid about getting too near the sides of hills. I didn't want to experiment this first time. But I felt the ship go up to currents in each crevasse in the hillside."²



Hawley Bowlus giving Peaches instruction before a flight. (San Diego History Center)

This was Anne's one and only flight in a glider. Although she became a proficient motor pilot in May 1931, she preferred soaring over any other flying. It was quiet and ethereal and fascinated her. Her glider flight proved an inspiration to other women to follow in her footsteps. The majority would take lessons at the Bowlus Gliding School in San Diego, California.³

Sarah Peaches Wallace

1909-1930

Born in Oklahoma, her father gave her the name of his favorite horse – *Peaches*. Her first encounter with an airplane occurred when she was eight years old. While Peaches was looking for four-leaf clovers, a biplane made an emergency landing near her. The entire event made page one of *The Daily Oklahoman*.

“A slim young man stepped out of the mass of varnished linen and shining wires and bowed to her. ‘Would you like to brave the heavens with me, my lady?’ asked Billy Parker, a 23-year-old aviator. Peaches Wallace nodded assent . . . she climbed into the observer’s seat and Billy Parker strapped her in, tuned up a limping cylinder that had forced him to descend, and drove the huge warplane back against the wind and up with the clouds until he’d circled the capitol. Then he brought his precious passenger back to her bed of four-leaf clovers.”⁴

In the early 1920s, the Wallace family relocated to San Diego where Peaches enrolled in the state college to study aviation. When the *Sun News* and Ryan Flying School publicized a contest to encourage women to participate in aviation, Peaches was one of the first to enter. Judged on her knowledge and accomplishments at school, she placed first in the competition. Named *Miss Air Capital of the West*, she received a complete course of instruction at the Ryan Flying School. Her lessons began on September 3, 1929. In addition, Peaches authored articles for the *San Diego Sun*, an assortment of magazines, and made public appearances to discuss aviation and her own flying experiences. The *Sun* referred to her as their *Flying Newsie*.

The Ryan Flying School considered Peaches to be an excellent student. Within a few weeks of her first solo flight, she received her pilot license. Her next venture in aviation focused on motorless flight. Peaches joined several other women to take glider lessons at nearby Lindbergh Field, home to the Bowlus Gliding School. After three hours of lessons in a primary trainer, she earned a Class 3 certificate by staying aloft for 36 seconds over Moreana Hills. She was the second woman to earn this license. She followed this quickly with Class 1 and 2 licenses. The Department of Commerce awarded her glider license #42 on January 26, 1930. She then proceeded to set a woman’s record for time aloft in a glider. She stayed airborne for 25 minutes.

Peaches response about flying gliders, “You just float along with the clouds and sometimes the lack of noise actually seems deafening. You realize that it all depends on you – there is no reliable old motor to help you.”

On March 27, 1930, Peaches made a routine glider flight in a Bowlus sailplane S-16. Attempting to land after a flight of nine minutes, the glider struck a metal bar on a telephone pole and crashed. The center section of the wing and fuselage sustained significant damage. Peaches claimed to be fine although she received significant bruising after landing on a sidewalk. Despite her injuries, she gave several presentations at the RKO-Orpheum Theater about aviation and gliding the following week. Her flying career ended when an appendicitis attack put her in the hospital. Following five major operations and transfusions, the popular aviatrix died on June 22.

Her family buried her on June 24 in Glen Abbey Memorial Park. Over 300 attended the funeral services including a large number of prominent San Diegans.

Peaches’ contributions to aviation were celebrated at the recently opened Emerald Hills Golf Club in Bonita, a city adjacent to San Diego. In her honor, the Peaches Wallace Gliderport was dedicated on July 27. Located just west of the club house, the area proved excellent for launching gliders. A glider meet took place in conjunction with the event. Competitions included duration, distance, and model gliders. After dropping wreathes of roses in memory of Peaches, Ruth Alexander competed in the distance event for sailplanes in the *Good Ship Anne*. Newspapers reported that Frank Hawks and his glider would participate and a pontoon-equipped glider was scheduled to land in a small lake, one of many hazards on the course.⁵

Ruth Blaney Alexander

1905-1930



Ruth Alexander ready to launch from Lindbergh Field. (International Women’s Air & Space Museum)

Ruth possessed a much more varied path to flying than her sister aviators discussed here. Born in Irving, Kan., to William and Ruth Blaney, their only child practically grew up on a horse according to her mother. “She grew up a happy child, making her own play things, and her playmates a red pony and little black dog.” When her father found work at a saw mill felling trees, Ruth made a failed attempt to parachute from the top of a barn with her father’s umbrella. Mounds of sawdust next to

the barn broke her fall. In 1914, Mr. Blaney opened a hardware store. Ruth became his eager assistant after school. She learned how to use tools and repair motors. She became so proficient that her father purchased a used automobile for her to tear down and put back together. Her equestrian skills and mechanical knowledge would later factor in her proficiency as a pilot.

Following high school graduation in May 1923, Ruth enrolled in Emporia State Teachers College for the summer term. This experience proved less than fulfilling and she withdrew at the end of the session. She was intent upon being a pilot, inspired by a barnstormer performing over her town in 1917. To earn enough money to pursue this endeavor, Ruth took a variety of jobs in Kansas. She found work in a hardware store and operated the Welcome Inn Beauty Shop in Olathe.

Ruth's first airplane ride occurred in the spring of 1928. Soon after, a bout of pneumonia resulted in a move to California. The state possessed an ideal climate for a swift recovery. She financed the journey by helping to drive a car for a couple heading to San Diego. There, Ruth took a day job in a beauty shop and one in a soda fountain at night to fund flying lessons. When the *Star News* and Ryan Flying School offered a scholarship to encourage women to fly, she applied along with Peaches and other hopeful women. Ruth placed in the top 10 of the contest and was not eligible for any prizes. Disappointed, she continued to save money for flying lessons. One of her jobs was noted as a beauty operator on a ship bound for Hawaii.⁶

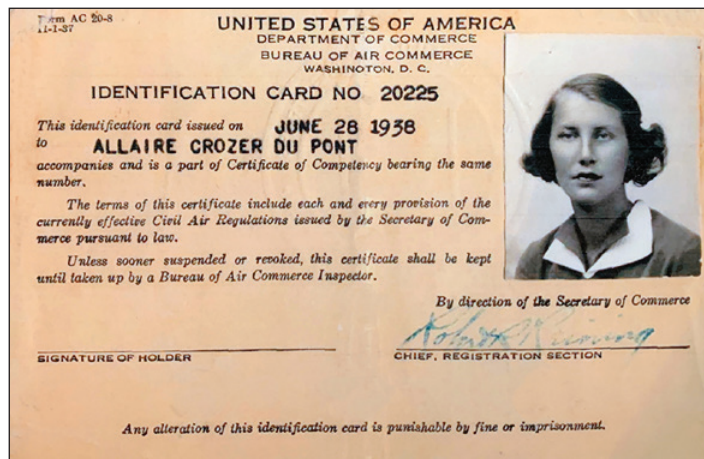
By September 1929, Ruth was able to enroll in ground school classes at Pacific Technical University. The rest of her time she flew both gliders and powered aircraft. Her first solo flight took place on October 25 under the guidance of Ryan School instructor Earl Prudden. November 17, she qualified for a Class 3 glider license and a private pilot license issued by the FAI and Department of Commerce and became the 65th licensed woman pilot in the United States. Ruth celebrated by flying a 90-hp Great Lakes biplane to 15,500 feet over San Diego, a woman's record for light planes. Surprised executives at the Great Lakes Co. sent the rising star a check for \$100.

Ruth enjoyed both types of flying and eventually placed an emphasis on powered aircraft. It offered many more opportunities for setting new records and traveling great distances. She didn't neglect her time in gliders, however. February 16, 1930, Ruth received a Class 2 license with flights over Mount Soledad. One week later, she crashed attempting to earn a Class 1 license. "A sudden downdraft struck the glider shortly after takeoff and forced Alexander to land on the mountainside. Her only injuries were a scratch on her nose, several bruises, and the fact that she fainted when the plane made a hard landing. Damage to the ship was confined to one wing and the cockpit."⁷

She stated the following in an interview. "I was skimming along as pretty as you please when a bad down draft caught my right wing. It went down rather suddenly and I could feel that I was out of line. I was too busy with the controls to be frightened. I had certain things to do to keep that ship from crashing and I concentrated on them. I hoped I could right the glider, but it slipped down and before I knew it the wing had hit the ground. The impact sent me skidding into a bush. Hurt?

Not to amount to anything. Besides, they say it takes at least two crack-ups to make a good pilot."⁸

Ruth planned a one-stop flight in her Barling NB-3 to depart September 18 from Lindbergh Field to New York. Carrying a heavy load of fuel, she took off at 3:28 a. m. into a thick marine layer. Airborne for 10 minutes, the plane fell into a spin and crashed on a hillside in Point Loma. Ruth was killed on impact. To honor the charismatic pilot, a glider exhibition



Allaire Du Pont. (Jeff Byard collection)

took place at the Peaches Wallace Gliderport on Sunday, March 1, 1931. The loss of the two women in such a short period of time left the glider community stunned. According to Gary Fogel, "Their leadership and inspiration was crucial to the local development of the sport . . . It would take several years before the enthusiasm for gliding activities in San Diego would again reach the fever pitch of early 1930."⁹

A number of additional American women became notable glider pilots in the 1930s. Allaire Du Pont and her husband Richard C. Du Pont led a life filled with aviation. Both licensed in powered aircraft and gliders, they set several glider records. Allaire became the National Distance Soaring Champion in 1934 for gliding from Pennsylvania to North Carolina. In 1935, she claimed the United States women's endurance record during a Harris Hill contest. Her time flying a Du Pont utility glider was five hours and 31 minutes.

Ellen Guinivere "Gwen" Kotter became the first woman from Utah to receive both a private and commercial pilot license at Lindbergh Field in 1929. Passionate about flying, it's not surprising that she also took up motorless flying at the Bowlus Glider School. She made two flights on February 17, 1930. The first earned her a Class 3 glider license with 58 seconds. A flight of more than a minute qualified her for a Class 2 license.¹⁰

Oroville, Wash., residents, Audrey Artman and her brother Cloyd started flying gliders in their teens. Cloyd built a glider in 1931 with the assistance of his high school shop teacher and Audrey. He named it the *Golden Dawn*. Cloyd stated in an interview what part Audrey played in its construction. "She sewed the cloth and helped me with many details of the



Audrey Artman. (National Soaring Museum)



Amelia Earhart in a primary glider at Wildwood Farm, Lake Orion, Mich., March 1929 (Henry Ford Museum)

final assembling. She took such an active part in my first flying that I taught her how to handle the ship. At the age of 16, Audrey became Washington state's first female glider pilot. By 1932, she is credited with 30 flights. They were not without mishaps, however. She received cuts and bruises in 1933 when a down-draft caused the glider to descend too rapidly. The result was a hard landing at Scott Field near Belleville.

In 1934, Audrey established a woman's duration record of two hours and five minutes with an altitude gain of 1,200 feet above the takeoff point on Mt. Hull. An auto-tow launched her from Pullman Airport. Reaching 3,000 feet above the valley floor, she remained there until forced down by darkness. The next year, she stayed aloft for three hours and 18 minutes with an altitude gain of 2,400 feet, a new endurance record. This was quite an accomplishment in a primary glider.

Audrey and Cloyd gave glider demonstrations at the Grand Coulee Dam construction site in Cloyd's second glider, the *Lone Eagle*. According to Artman historian Linda Chism, "I think Audrey flew just once at Grand Coulee. She caused a considerable gasp when the glider slowly slid off the rocky point and skidded 100 feet before straightening out. Press and Pathe News photographers loved it." With her brother's death resulting from a crash in his third glider design, Audrey gave up flying gliders and took up powered flight.¹¹

Amelia Earhart supported glider flying by participating in an assortment of events. She entered the Famous Motored Pilots' Glider Derby that took place during the 1929 Cleveland National Air Races. Sponsored by the National Glider Association, the predecessor of the Soaring Society of America, the competition involved duration and spot landing events.

An auto tow launched the Franklin utility gliders into the air. Amelia, not familiar with gliding, "very narrowly escaped injury when she tried to execute a turn . . . and fell into a spin, which she did not pull out of until the glider was within a few feet of the ground."¹²

Amelia accepted the chairmanship of the committee in charge of women's activities of the National Glider Association and attended events sponsored by the group. One was the in May 1930 jointly supported by the Aeronautical Chamber of Commerce.

To further support their flying, the pioneering women glider pilots organized clubs. They proved instrumental in acquiring financing and promoted camaraderie.

Anne Lindbergh Glider Club

Peaches Wallace was responsible for organizing the first women's glider club in the United States. She believed naming this inaugural club in Anne Lindbergh's honor would recognize her significant impact upon aviation. On January 30, 1930, the first club meeting took place. The group made Anne an honorary president for which she was delighted. The National Glider Association certified the club on February 24 as Anne Lindbergh Gliders of San Diego, Glider Club No. 37. Criterion for membership was good sportsmanship and cooperative generosity.



Anne Lindbergh Glider Club. (San Diego History Center)

Twenty-five charter members included Ruth Alexander, Gwen Bacon, Jean Barnes, Peaches Wallace, Julia and Helen Twisleton, Helen Van Dusen and Florence Rainwater. An active group, they attended every local meet, exhibitions, and shows.

The glider club purchased an Evans primary glider from Richard D. Ferguson on February 11. Three weeks later the Department of Commerce gave the glider identification mark 26W. The club's next goal was the purchase of a Bowlus S-29 sailplane. To finance the project, they organized a dinner dance at the U.S. Grant Hotel. Generous donations allowed them to take ownership of the Bowlus under construction, naming it *The Good Ship Anne*. Charles Lindbergh made the first flight in the glider on February 24. It resulted in an unofficial American distance record along the Pacific Ocean from Mt. Soledad to Del Mar. The club also nicknamed the official training glider at the Bowlus Glider School (598M) *Tillie the Toiler*.¹³

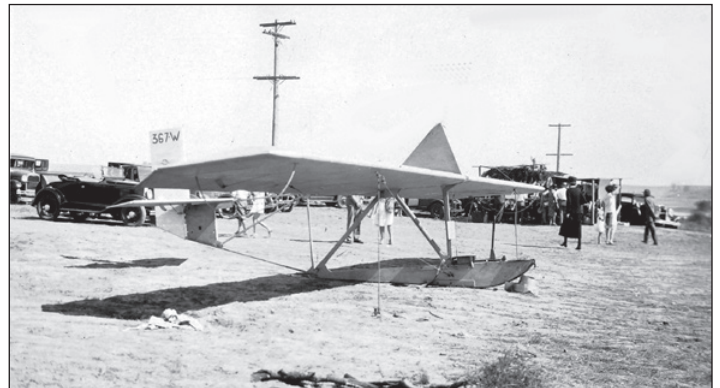
At the close of 1930, the club's secretary Helen Van Dusen wrote the following uplifting note despite the tragic loss of members Wallace and Alexander. "*And so ends our first year as a glider club, and as we look back at its struggles and the eventful, emotional time that it has been, there is not one of us but can feel that it has been a season of growth. Growth, not only in our knowledge of aviation and gliding, but in individual strengthening of self-control, sympathy, and understanding. Those of us who have worked together thru this year know that we shall always feel something a little stronger than just casual friendship for each other.*"

Marvel Crosson Glider Club

The Marvel Crosson Glider Club was established in honor of record-setting aviatrix Marvel Crosson who lost her life in the 1929 National Women's Air Race. On March 2, 1930, it became the second glider organization for women. Jean Staph provided the motivation for the club or squadron which soared from Glider Hill in the Hollywood Riviera near Redondo Beach, California. Flying a borrowed Evans glider, they operated a refreshment stand on the field to raise money to purchase their



Anne Lindbergh Glider Club signing in competitors at the Peaches Wallace Glider Port dedication. Trophies can be seen to the right of the image. (San Diego Air & Space Museum)



Tillie the Toiler trainer used by The Anne Lindbergh Glider Club. (San Diego Air & Space Museum)



Goodrich Girls Glider Club, 1929. (National Soaring Museum)

own glider. Members wore white coveralls with the club's blue wing insignia over the left pocket. Newspapers reported that a squadron was established in Madison, Wisconsin and plans made to form clubs in Portland and Alaska.¹⁴

Goodyear Girls Glider Club

Thirty-seven young women employees of the B.F. Goodrich Co. united to form the Goodrich Girls Glider Club in April 1930. Lee Shoenhair, glider and air race pilot,

along with Frank Hawks, record-setting pilot in both powered aircraft and gliders, acted as mentors and instructors for the club. Hazel Schippel, a founding member, stated "Although we never made much altitude, we did have plenty of exercise and fresh air as we started by using the V towing rope method." There is very little further information on the club other than they flew a Baker-McMillan Cadet which was destroyed by fire. They apparently disbanded by 1942.¹⁵

Dunlap, Lindbergh, Wallace, Alexander and other women glider pilots paved the way for a host of successful women who soared for the pure joy of *silent flight*. As glider record holder Helen Montgomery stated, "The sport of gliding and soaring is nearly unsurpassed . . . There is nothing quite so fascinating as seeking out and following the invisible currents of rising air which bear the sailplane aloft to sometimes staggering heights above the earth." Inspired by these remarkable pioneers, a new generation challenged the forces of nature in their gliders. Their dedication resulted in a substantial increase of women competing in national and world soaring events which was once inconceivable.¹⁶ ➔

End Notes

1. "Wings over Dixie – Ninety-Niners," *The Charlotte Observer*, 26 Feb 1939; "A Girl Flyer in a Motorless Ship," *Chicago Tribune*, 14 Sept 1929; "Girl is Head of Glider Club," *Oakland Tribune*, 7 Mar 1930; "Gliding on the Wings of the Wind," *Popular Mechanics* (loose article).
2. Lindbergh, p. 123-124.
3. Winters, p. 81.
4. *Daily Oklahoman*, 10 Apr 1918, p. 5.
5. *Marshall County News*, 6 Mar 1931, p. 5.
6. *The Frankfort Index*, 31 Jan 1929, p. 7; *Kansas Digest*, 16 Feb 1930.
7. Fogel, p. 74.

8. *Stockton Evening and Sunday Record*, 10 March 1930, p. 16.
9. Fogel, p.123.
10. *The Pioneer*, March-April 1970; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 Jul 1937, p. 2; *Evening Sun*, 6 July 1937, p. 2.
11. *NASM Journal* Fall 2011, p. 7, 18 Jul 1934, 26 Apr 1938; *Spokesman Review*, 12 Apr 1937, 14 Jun 1934.
12. Fogel, p.95.
13. Ibid, p. 60..
14. *Los Angeles Times*, 13 Mar 1930, p. 43, 4 Mar 1930, p. 27; *The Tribune* 22 Mar 1930, p. 6; *Wisconsin State Journal*, 5 June 1930, p. 4
15. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 7 April 1930 p. 15; 9 Aug 1942, p. 13.
16. Plank, p. 279.

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