

# HISTORIC DOWNTOWN

## UNDETERRED INDEPENDENCE

### Stunt Aviatrix Katherine Stinson Encapsulated American Autonomy

by Jamie Manser

**W**e hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

In the annals of American history, July marks a big one - the celebration of the Declaration of Independence. Amid the barbeques and fireworks that venerate those surly upstarts who founded this country, it is also a time to commemorate the citizens who were not white males - those who pushed the status quo and fought for equality.

It was this month - eight years before women's suffrage was established in 1920 - that Katherine Stinson became the fourth American woman to receive a pilot's license, beginning her career as a trailblazing aviatrix with a list of "firsts" in aeronautics. She touched numerous cities worldwide, including our fair Old Pueblo.

Stinson's petite physique - she weighed in at a whopping 100 pounds and stood at 5 feet - long, brown locks, soft voice and mere 21 years belied a *tour de force esprit* that flight instructor Max Lillie did not recognize when she approached him to teach her the craft of aviation at Cicero Field in Chicago.

It took Stinson's steadfast resolve to convince Lillie to amend his initial rebuke and take her under his wing. Lillie agreed to a trial lesson and the two ascended in a Wright B. Within four hours of instruction, Stinson was flying solo. Purportedly, Stinson's composure during that first flight conveyed her inner strength to Lillie - compelling him to not only school Stinson on flying, but how to perform stunts as well.

It was the stunt flying Katherine was striving for as a pianist looking for a way to cover her college music education in Europe. The woman knew exhibition flying at state and county fairs brought a pretty penny - \$500 to \$1000 per show was no joke in 1912. Stinson sold her piano to pay for flight school, fell in love with the craft and left music behind.

Inside a year of earning her license, Stinson was hitting the exhibition circuit as "The Flying Schoolgirl," a title she dubbed for herself after shaving a few years off of her age. It was also in 1913, at the Montana State Fair, that Stinson became the first woman to transport mail via airplane.



image courtesy of arizona historical society/#b114006

stinson flies mail over downtown.

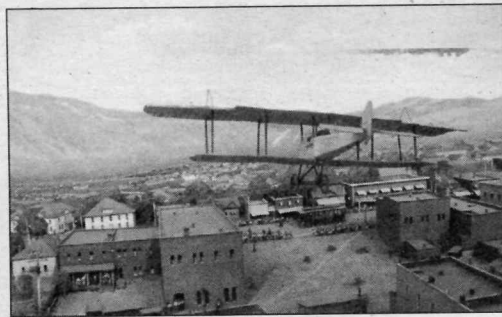


photo: Jamie Manser

During the infancy of flight and a time when women were still second class citizens, Katherine's acumen for novelty and her ambition led her to become the first woman to perform the loop-the-loop on July 18, 1915 in Chicago. Later that year, Stinson spiced up the feat by adding a "dippy twist" wherein the plane rolls wing-over-wing at the top of the loop.

In November of 1915, Tucson proved progressive and commissioned the aviatrix to perform, as well as demonstrate aerial mail delivery. Flying from the Southern Arizona Fairgrounds to downtown, Stinson dropped mail pouches in a vacant lot (now Jacome Plaza, 101 N. Stone Ave.) near the post office. For fifteen years, Tucson was the first and only city in Arizona to have sanctioned air mail service.

A month anon in Los Angeles, Katherine became the first pilot to skywrite when she spelled out "CAL" in the night heavens with railroad flares that were attached to her wingtips, bedazzling the amassed crowd.

Flying over the coastal ranges of California from San Diego to San Francisco in 1917, Stinson set a long-distance record of 610 miles and subsequently broke her own record when flying mail from Chicago close to New York City, clocking 783 miles.

Stinson continued to garner fame, going global as the first woman to fly in Japan and China and being the first to deliver mail in western Canada, flying to Edmonton from Calgary in July 1918.

During World War I, Stinson answered U.S. military's call for volunteer pilots and was rejected twice based on her gender. Undaunted by the spurn, Katherine contributed to the war effort by driving an ambulance in France, where the harsh conditions led to her contracting tuberculosis in 1920.

Moving to Santa Fe to aid in what was a long recovery process, Stinson got well and married former WWI pilot Miguel Otero in 1928. The two gave up flying in 1930 and Katherine took up architecture while Miguel became a judge.

Katherine Stinson stayed in Santa Fe and, just shy of celebrating the 65th anniversary of earning her pilot's license, died on July 8, 1977.

She is buried at the Santa Fe National Cemetery.

Look for an exhibit on early Tucson aviation at the Arizona Historical Society's Downtown Museum, 140 N. Stone Ave., this fall.

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THU. JULY 14 Big in Vegas - Roots Honky Tonk, 5:30 pm, \$3 cover

#### OTHER JULY EVENTS

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SAT. JULY 9 John Coinman Band with Teddy Morgan CD Release Party, \$12 advance, \$15 door, info@rhythmandroots.org  
SAT. JULY 16 Clumsy Lovers from Vancouver Bluegrass Celtic Rock, \$15 advance, \$17 door, info@rhythmandroots.org

SUMMER HOURS: SHOPS 10:00 am - 4:00 pm Monday-Saturday & 11:00 am - 4:00 pm Sunday

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