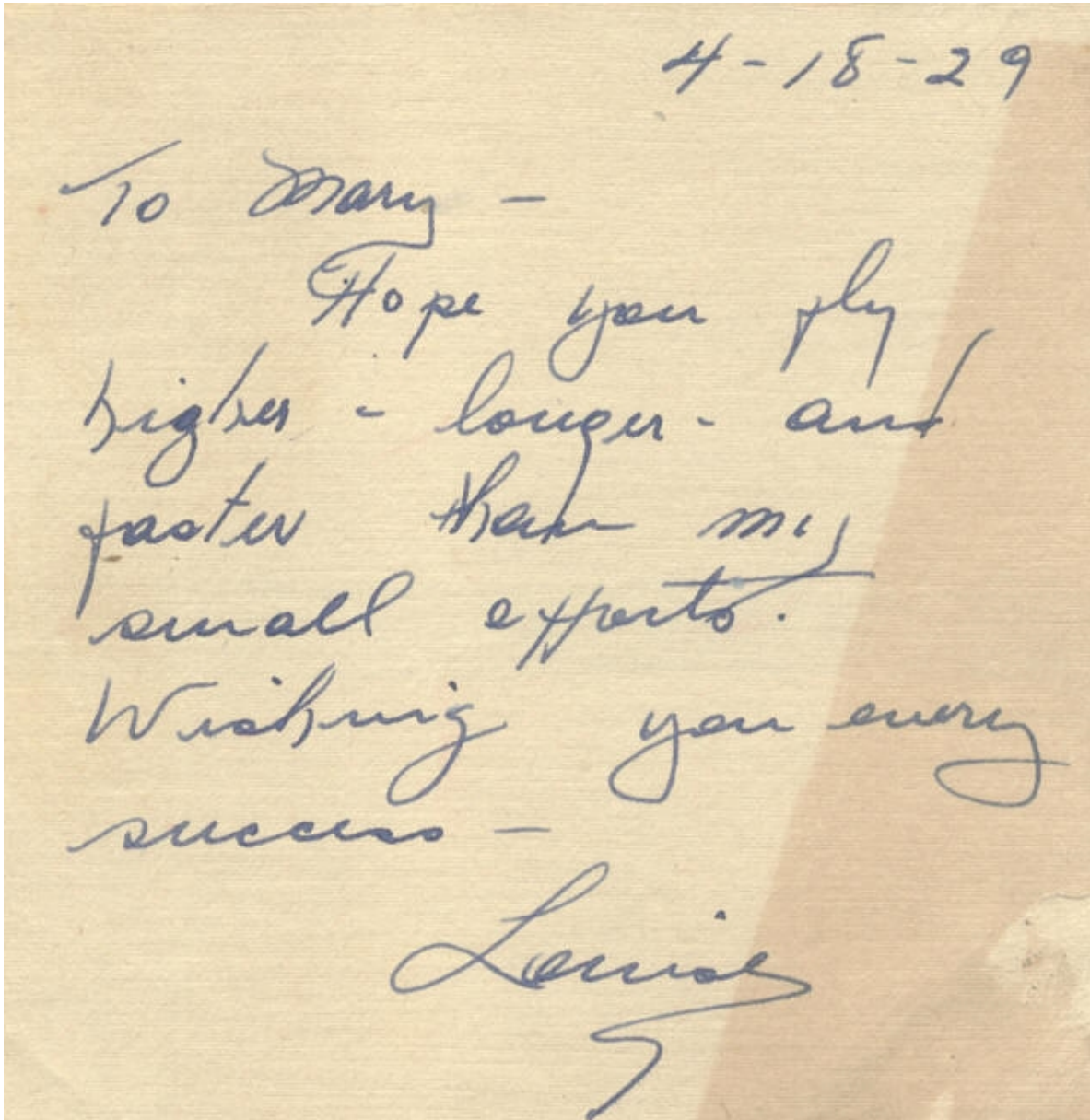


Donation of the Month

Object: Louise Thaden note
Catalog #: 2001.16.1
Donor: Ed Dell Wortz



The Museum is a firm believer in the old saw, "One man's trash is another man's treasure." In the late 1990s Ed Dell Wortz of Fort Smith noticed a scrapbook in the trash. It had belonged to Mary Berry Preston and had probably been thrown away by the folks who cleaned out her house after her death.

The scrapbook documented Mary's years at Bentonville High School, 1928-1931. It included the typical photos, letters, party favors, programs, newspaper clippings, and dried bouquets from four years of fun, friendship, and education. Tucked within the scrapbook was a little note dated April 18, 1929: "To Mary —

Hope you fly higher — longer — and faster than my small efforts. Wishing you every success — Louise.” Putting two and two together, the Museum quickly realized that this wasn’t any ordinary note.

When Louise McPhetridge Thaden (1905-1979) was born in Bentonville, Arkansas, it had been only two years since the Wright Brothers recorded the world’s first flight. Less than 25 years later, she too would go down in aviation history.

Louise was very much her father’s daughter. From him she learned how to hunt and fish, repair the car, and do many family chores. She was an adventuresome young woman who in 1919 paid \$5 for a biplane ride with a barnstormer — an early sign of her interest in flight.

Graduating from Bentonville High School at 16, Louise enrolled at the University of Arkansas, but was there only three years. A job she had taken in Wichita, Kansas, to help pay for classes turned into much more. There she met Walter Beech, whose Travel Air Manufacturing Company was the world’s largest producer of private aircraft, and D.C. Warren, a Travel Air distributor. Warren offered her not only a job in California as a sales agent, but also a chance to learn to fly.

In April 1927 Louise began work in San Francisco, and in February 1928 she soloed; in May of that year she received her pilot’s license. Herbert Thaden, a young engineer and former Army pilot, was also in San Francisco, designing and building aircraft. Their mutual interests led to marriage in July 1928.

The public had fallen in love with aviation following Lindbergh’s 1927 transatlantic flight and had become “record hungry.” On December 7, 1928, Louise set the altitude record for women at 20,260 feet. She then circled the skies in March 1929 for more than 22 hours and set a new solo endurance record for women. That April, upon setting a new women’s speed record of 156 mph, she became the only woman ever to hold simultaneous altitude, solo endurance, and speed records.

In August 1929 the National Women’s Air Derby, the first women-only cross-country race, ran from California to Ohio. Flying Beech’s new Travel Air Speedwing, Louise was up against 19 of America’s best female pilots, including Amelia Earhart. After eight grueling days of flying, Louise won her first major race. That November, 99 female pilots founded The Ninety-Nines (International Organization of Women Pilots) for the support and advancement of aviation. Louise served as the first de facto president, and later as national secretary and vice president.

In 1930, Herb’s company was sold and the couple moved to Pittsburgh. For Louise, “...it was pleasant after racing around the country to settle down in a house of our own, immersed for the first time in marital domesticity.”

In July son Bill was born. But by May Herb’s company had been bought out, which meant several more moves. Then in August 1932 Louise teamed with Frances Marsalis in what the press called “the Flying Boudoir.” They spent 196 hours in the air and made 78 air-to-air contacts, setting a new refueling duration record. In 1933 the family moved to Kansas City, and in September daughter Pat was born.

In 1935 and 1936 Louise served as a field representative for the National Air Marking Program at the Bureau of Air Commerce, which organized the writing of town names on buildings across the country as navigational aids for pilots. By 1936 the Thadens had moved back to Pittsburgh. In June Louise’s father died, and though shaken by his death, she put her energy into flying. In July she set a new light-plane speed record. But the highlight of the year came in September.

The Bendix Transcontinental Air Race from New York City to Los Angeles was open only to men until

1935; in 1936 a special award for the first-place woman was offered. Louise and Blanche Noyes flew their Beechcraft Staggerwing for 14 hours and 55 minutes and finished first. As race winners, they received not only the winner's prize but also the women's "consolation" prize. Louise won the prestigious Harmon Trophy as the outstanding U.S. woman pilot for 1936.

She set two additional records for distance and speed in 1937, but soon afterward her friend Amelia Earhart was lost over the Pacific. Contemplating that loss, and perhaps the continued time away from her family, by 1938 Louise retired from professional racing. A "so-called career," she said, "isn't half as important as raising a family." In 1938 she published her memoirs, *High, Wide and Frightened*, speaking honestly about the conflict between her passion for flying and her personal life.

By 1942 the Thadens were in Roanoke, Virginia, where Herb founded Thaden Engineering, which designed products for the war effort. From 1945 to 1952 Louise assisted with Relief Wings, a civilian air-ambulance service, and the American Red Cross Motor Corps, which flew disaster-relief assignments. Over a twenty-year period Louise also served in the Civil Air Patrol, conducting search-and-rescue missions and helping with the Virginia cadet program; through her leadership she attained the rank of lieutenant colonel.

In 1950 Louise's mother died and the family returned to Bentonville for her burial. In June 1951, proud of Louise's achievements, Bentonville dedicated its municipal airport to her.

During the 1950s and 60s Louise was a partner in Herb's businesses, Thaden Engineering and Thaden Molding Corporation. For two years she also worked with the Department of Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services. In February 1969 Herb died. After 40 years of marriage, Louise took the reins as sole owner of Thaden Engineering Company.

Throughout her life Louise Thaden was a humble woman who exhibited what author Gene Nora Jessen called "quiet excellence." So it was appropriate that during the 1970s she began to receive many recognitions.

In 1973 the OX5 Club of America, which honors pioneer aviators, presented Louise its Silver Wings Achievement Award. The next year the Staggerwing Museum in Tennessee named its office and library building in her honor. "Louise Thaden Day" in Arkansas and "Louise Thaden Week" in Bentonville were proclaimed in August 1976, and Louise McPhetridge Thaden Field was rededicated.

Three years later Louise Thaden died of a heart attack at her home in High Point, North Carolina. Memorial services were held on her 74th birthday.

In recent years Louise's honors have accumulated. She's been inducted into the Arkansas Aviation Hall of Fame (1980), the International Aerospace Hall of Fame and the National Aviation Hall of Fame (1999), and the Women in Aviation - International Pioneer Hall of Fame (2000), among others. Commemorative tours have also recognized her, including a 1989 retracing of the Air Derby route and the 1996 Staggerwing Beech Tour celebrating the Bendix race.

Her legacy, however, lies not just in her aviation records, but also in her family. Son Bill became an Air Force jet fighter pilot and Eastern Airlines captain; daughter Pat learned to fly and earned her pilot's license. Among her four grandchildren (Terry von Thaden, Tracy Thaden, Fred W. Frost III, and Nancy Frost), two share a connection to aviation; Terry is a certified pilot and a university research scientist and

instructor in aviation human factors, while Fred works with American Airlines.

Back in April 1929 when Louise penned her note of humble encouragement to Bentonville High School student Mary Berry to “fly higher — longer — and faster,” she had achieved two of her record-setting goals to fly higher and longer; later that year she flew faster when she won the National Women’s Air Derby. What a wonderful and prophetic message.

And to think it was found in the trash.

CREDITS

“Louise Thaden: Pioneer Aviator,” Rogers Historical Museum (2003).