1-4-2022

MSS0491. Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie collection finding aid

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Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie collection

Title: Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie collection
Collection No: MSS.491
Extent: 0.5 cubic feet
Inclusive Dates: 1921-2019 and undated

Abstract: The collection comprises materials documenting the career of Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie (1902-1975), an aviation pioneer who was based in Memphis.

Processed by: Charles Griffith, 2016; Gerald Chaudron, 2016-2022
Access: Open to all researchers.
Language: English
Preferred Citation: Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie collection, Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis.

Publication date: 2022 January
Biographical information

Phoebe Jane Park was born in Des Moines, Iowa on November 21, 1902, to Harry J. Park and Madge Traister Park. After her parents divorced, Phoebe’s mother married Andrew Fairgrave (or Fairgraves) and Phoebe and her brother Paul took their step-father’s surname. The family moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1914 and it was there she saw her first airshow in 1920. She began flying lessons and bought a Curtiss JN-4 biplane after her fourth flight. In her late teens she began doing stunts, including wing walking, and made the highest parachute jump for a woman. In 1922 she married her instructor, Vernon Cleophas Omlie (1895-1936), a talented pilot who has been an instructor during the war, while both were working for the Curtiss Field in Minneapolis. In 1925, the couple moved to Memphis, Tennessee, leasing the Millington airfield to establish a flying school and a chartered commercial air service. Vernon would later become the manager of Memphis Municipal Airport. During the Mississippi flood in 1927, Vernon and Phoebe flew rescue missions.

In 1927, Phoebe became the first woman to receive an airplane mechanic's license, as well as the first licensed female transport pilot. She worked for the Mono Aircraft Company and competed successfully in air races. She was a charter member of the Ninety-Nines, an organization of women pilots along with Amelia Earhart. She campaigned for Franklin Roosevelt during his first campaign for president, flying speakers around the country, and did the same in 1936. She was appointed as Special Advisor for Air Intelligence to the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics.

On August 5, 1936, Vernon was killed in a plane crash while flying as a passenger near St Louis, Missouri. Phoebe resigned her position in Washington and returned to Memphis. In 1941 she was appointed Senior Private Flying Specialist of the Civil Aeronautics Authority, tasked with training pilots for the war effort. She established a program to train women instructors with the Tennessee Bureau of Aeronautics, along with 66 flight schools across the country. Phoebe left Washington in 1952 after becoming disenchanted with the increasing regulation of aviation and returned to Memphis. Her subsequent business ventures in Mississippi failed and when she died of lung cancer on July 17, 1975, in Indianapolis, Indiana, she was an alcoholic, in straightened circumstances, and largely forgotten.

Scope and contents

The collection consists of scattered materials documenting the life of Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie. The contents include photographs, newspaper clippings, publications and correspondence mostly from the period when she was active as a stunt and racing pilot in the 1920s and 1930s.

Related materials

Phoebe Omlie, M Files, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library and Information Center.
Artifacts, Pink Palace Museum, Memphis.
Subject terms

Air pilots—Tennessee—Memphis.
Omlie, Phoebe Fairgrave, 1902-1975.
Omlie, Vernon C., 1895-1936.

Inventory

Box 1

Folder

Series 1. Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie.
3 Correspondence, 1933-1936. Letters from Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Tennessee politicians E.H. Crump, Kenneth McKellar and Gordon Browning regarding Phoebe Omlie’s appointment to Advisory Committee for Aeronautics and other matters.
4 Typescript: Omlie, Phoebe, “My First Jump”, undated. Describes first parachute jump on April 10, 1921 in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. Possibly written for submission to Liberty magazine, according to a note and attached resume.
5 Typescript: Omlie, Phoebe, “Flying Monocoupe “Miss Memphis” in 1931 National Air Derby From Santa Monica California to Cleveland Ohio”, undated.
7 Resumes, 1930s-1950s.
8 Promotional material, undated. Includes cards, letterheads and envelopes from Phoebe Fairgraves, Phoebe and Vernon Omlie, Phoebe Omlie. Includes copy of advertisement for Flying Circus with Phoebe Fairgraves, Parma, Missouri, 19?? July 2-3.
9 Miscellany, 1928-1964 and undated. Includes clippings re: Phoebe Fairgraves performing stunts over Overton Park, Memphis, undated; Phoebe Omlie and Stella Akin in Binghampton, New York, campaigning for Franklin Roosevelt, 1936 September 17; Baptist Memorial Hospital, Memphis, x-ray report on Phoebe Omlie, 1928 October 28; “Ninety-Nines” membership card, 1933-1934; Deposition: Madge Fairgraves swears to identity of daughter Phoebe Fairgraves Omlie, District Court, Polk County, Iowa, 1936 December 8; Letter: Allida Black. Memphis, to Phoebe Omlie, Plaza Hotel, Washington, D.C., 1964 October 5, re: claim for
unpaid rent.

Series 2. Vernon C. Omlie.
10 Pilot’s license: Transport pilot’s license, 1936 November 1 expiry date.
12 Letter: Vernon Omlie, Memphis, Tenn., to Phoebe Omlie, 1936 July 31.

Articles on Phoebe and Vernon Omlie:
15 Time, Vol. 28, No. 8, 1936 August 24. Includes article (p. 48) on Phoebe Omlie’s work with Works Progress Administration to install air markers across the United States.
16 The Democratic Digest, Vol. 13, No. 12, 1936 December. Includes article (pp. 17, 26) “Taking the Air” describing campaigning for Franklin Roosevelt’s re-election by air; Phoebe Omlie piloted a plane carrying Stella Akin and Izetta Jewell Miller.

Other:
19 Program: First International Aero Congress, Omaha, Nebraska, 1921 November 3-5.

24 Memphis Airport:


26 Miscellaneous.

Series 5. Photographs.

27 Family and friends, 1921, 1934 and undated.
28 Phoebe Omlie, 1936 and undated.
29 Phoebe Omlie, 1935 and undated.
30 Vernon Omlie, undated.
31 Miscellaneous, undated. Includes images of pilots, including Amelia Earhart, an early rendition of Memphis Municipal Airport, and aircraft submitted to the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics.

Addition, 2022