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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

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## Related materials

MSS.475. *Memphis Press-Scimitar* newspaper morgue, file 67011.  
Phoebe Omlie, M Files, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library and Information Center.  
Artifacts, Pink Palace Museum, Memphis.

Artifacts, Memphis International Airport.

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## Subject terms

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

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## Inventory

### Box 1

Folder

#### Series 1. Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie.

- 1 Pilot log book: Phoebe Omlie, Moline, Ill., 1929 April-1931 June 15.
- 2 Memphis Chamber of Commerce file: Correspondence and newspaper clippings re: Phoebe and Vernon Omlie, 1929-1930. Compiled by J.C. Ottinger.
- 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.
- 6 Omlie, Phoebe, "Flying Appeals to Average Individual", *Travel and Transportation*, 1935 Winter, pp. 18-19.
- 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 Binghamton, 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.
- 11 Prospectus: Inter America Goodwill Tour, circa 1932. Plan for tour of Central America by Vernon Omlie with costs for potential advertisers.
- 12 Letter: Vernon Omlie, Memphis, Tenn., to Phoebe Omlie, 1936 July 31.
- 13 Death of Vernon Omlie: Telegram: Charleston Putnam, President, Chicago and Southern Airlines to Phoebe Omlie, Washington, D.C., 1936 August 6; Letter: James A. Farley (Postmaster General and Chairman of Democratic National Committee), New York, to Phoebe Omlie, 1936 August 10; Clipping: *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 1936 August 6, 7.

**Series 3. Publications.**

Articles on Phoebe and Vernon Omlie:

- 14 Thomas, Joan, "The Aero-Sportswomen", *Popular Aviation*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1934 March, pp.160, 184; Callen, Charles Lane, "There's No Stopping a Woman with Courage Like This!", *American Magazine*, Vol. 108, No. 2, 1929 August, pp. 28-29, 141-144 (copy). Articles on Phoebe 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.
- 17 Dawson, David, "The Flying Omlies: A Barnstorming Legacy", *Memphis*, Vol. 5, No. 9, 1980 December, pp.42-51.
- 18 "Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie: Acrobatic Athlete of the Airways", *Memphis Press Scimitar*, pp. 1C, 10C, 1980 October 28.

Other:

- 19 Program: First International Aero Congress, Omaha, Nebraska, 1921 November 3-5.
- 20 "Curtiss Flying Service: Charter Rates and Instructions for Computation of Cross Country Tariffs, June 20, 1929". Issued by General Traffic Office, Curtiss Flying Service, New York.
- 21 Advertising booklet: "The Cord Cup Race: Transcontinental Sweepstakes Handicap Air Derby of the 1932 National Air Races".
- 22 National Recovery Administration, "Code of Fair Competition for the Air Transport Industry", Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933; Renner, George T., *Geographic Education for the Air Age*, New York: Macmillan, 1942.
- 23 Stanton, George Sidney, *Path of Flight: Practical Information About Navigation of Private Aircraft*, Washington, D.C.: Civil Aeronautics Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, 1945; Spafford, Russell R., *Pilot Regulations: Private and Introduction to Commercial*,

Tennessee Flight Operators Association, 1947.

**Series 3. Miscellany.**

- 24 Memphis Airport:  
Engineering Committee, Memphis Chamber of Commerce Aviation Division, "A Study and Report of the Memphis Airport, circa 1928. Binder has name "C.M. Anderson".
- 25 Opening of Memphis Airport, 1929 June 14-15: Invitation; "Rules and Regulations for Flying Events at the Memphis Airport Dedication, June 14-15 1929". Vernon Omlie acted as official starter; Memphis Chamber of Commerce press release by John C. Ottinger, Jr.
- 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**

- 32 Publication: Dawson, David, "The Flying Omlies: A Barnstorming Legacy", *Memphis*, Vol. 44:4, 2019 July, pp.30-36.