

Lost Lady of American Aviation

By Glenn Kerfoot

IF Helen Richey were alive today, she would be over seventy-five years old. Who is Helen Richey? She is probably the least known of a hardy band of female pilots who took to the skies back in the days when flying was a rarity, even for men. Although she was the first female commercial airline co-pilot in history, nobody has written her biography, her name is included in few reference books, and the National Air and Space Museum displays not one memento of her colorful career. Even though she was the first woman authorized to fly the United States air mail, Helen has never been honored with a commemorative stamp.¹ However, a baseball field for young people in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, where she is buried, is named in her honor.

Except for the fact that she never flew over an ocean, Helen Richey was probably as fine a pilot as Amelia Earhart. Amelia said so herself, when she asked Helen to be her co-pilot on a cross-country trial of the plane Amelia eventually tried to fly around the world. Frances Harrell, another legendary female pilot of the 1930s, chose Helen to fly with her in a 1933 endurance flight in which they remained aloft for ten days. When a refueling hose knocked a hole in the plane's fabric on the third day, Helen crawled out on the wing with a needle and thread and calmly sewed up the rip.

Born on November 21, 1909, in McKeesport, Helen graduated from the local high school in 1927 and attended Carnegie Tech for a short while. She completed her flight training at the Pittsburgh School of Aeronautics, located at Bettis Field near Dravosburg. Her first paying job was as a stunter at the Johnsonburg airport.

A diminutive brunette whom interviewers described as "pretty as a

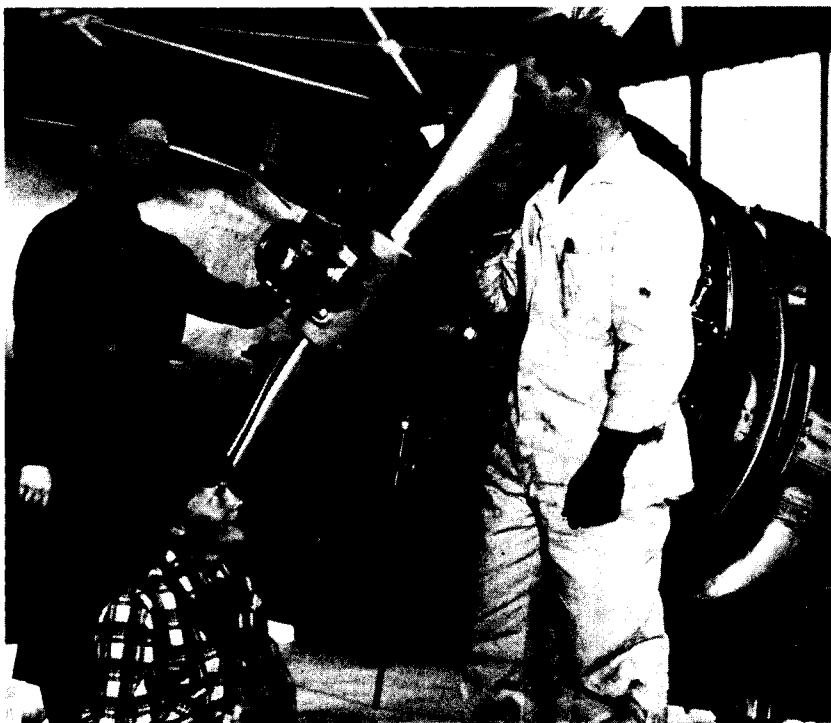
The author of some 1,400 articles, Glenn Kerfoot is a retired writer and communications manager. With his wife, he now operates a communications consulting service. He was born in McKeesport and graduated from high school there; he maintains contact with the area through his membership in the McKeesport Heritage Center.—Editor

¹ This article is based on news articles published between 1930, when Ms. Richey began flying, and her death in 1947. They were kept in scrapbooks maintained by the flier. Most of the material is from the McKeesport *Daily News*, *Pittsburgh Press*, *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, although the collection contains clippings from thirty-nine other U.S. newspapers, three European journals, and twenty magazines. After Ms. Richey's death, the scrapbooks were stored by her niece, Amy Gamble Lannan, now of Hilo, Hawaii, and donated to the author in 1974.

movie star," she set altitude and speed records for light planes, won scores of high-speed races and stunting contests, and flew all over the United States urging city officials to paint the names of their towns on rooftops to guide lost pilots. She was among the first group of women to earn a flight instructor's license, then be hired to train flying cadets for the United States Air Force.

In December 1934, she was hired as a co-pilot by Central Airlines (headquartered in Pittsburgh) and assigned to the tricky Washington, D.C.-to-Detroit route, which crossed the treacherous Allegheny Mountains. Her employment set off a storm of protest from the all-male pilots' union. Although a threatened strike never materialized, she was refused membership in the union. Intimidated by the controversy, the airline used her on fewer than a dozen trips in eight months.

Helen Richey (standing) and Amelia Earhart talking with mechanic readying Amelia's Lockheed aircraft for 1939 Bendix cross-country race. They finished fifth. The plane is the one Amelia flew in her doomed around-the-world flight. (courtesy of author)



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Helen Richey (standing) and Amelia Earhart talking with mechanic readying Amelia's Lockheed aircraft for 1939 Bendix cross-country race. They finished fifth. The plane is the one Amelia flew in her doomed around-the-world flight. (courtesy of author)



POPULAR PILOTS -:- By ACE BRADY



Syndicated newspaper feature, 1935, lauding Helen Richey's aviation achievements (courtesy of author)

The following August she resigned, touching off another protest, this time from women's organizations led by Amelia Earhart.

In the early days of World War II, when America's allies needed all the help they could get, Helen was there. She ferried fighters and bombers around the British Isles for the Royal Air Force's Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA). She was the first American to fly the famous Hurricane fighter. After a stint as commander of the American ATA group, she transferred to the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)

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to ferry planes and tow anti-aircraft targets for the U.S. Air Force. Her exploits so intrigued the noted war correspondent Ernie Pyle that he devoted two of his syndicated columns to her.

Quiet and shy, and reluctant to talk about herself, Helen tended to play down her aeronautical achievements. One WASP pilot who had flown with her for more than a year considered herself a close friend, but she said that she had no idea Helen had flown for an airline or served in England until she read about it years later. Never a headline seeker, Helen frequently kidded interviewers. When a society editor for the San Francisco *Examiner* asked about her plans when she finished flying, she replied, "I suppose I'll look for a job slinging hash." A Miami *Herald* reporter asked if she had any marital plans and was told, "Yes, indeed. I'm looking for a rich old guy who'll buy me all the gasoline I can use, and let me fly wherever and whenever I like." When a *Washington Post* interviewer asked her what was her most thrilling moment in aviation, Helen said, "I can't think of one offhand."

Following her discharge from the WASP when it was disbanded in December 1944, Helen moved to New York City in search of another aviation job. Again the door was slammed when she learned that all available openings were earmarked for returning male military pilots. As her savings dwindled, she kept lowering her standard of living, eventually moving to a tiny one-room walkup in lower Manhattan. Friends watched her grow more and more despondent, and during a Christmas visit in 1946 with her family in McKeesport, she appeared listless and withdrawn. During the visit, she spoke repeatedly of being "washed up" in aviation.² On January 7, 1947, at the age of thirty-seven, alone in her room, Helen Richey swallowed a vial of sleeping pills. The first lady of the airlines had made her last flight. ■

² Richey's niece described Helen's 1946 despondency in an interview with the author.