



Nellie Zabel Willhite

Dakota Images

Nellie Zabel Willhite, a pioneering South Dakota pilot, watched aviation emerge from the barnstorming era into a popular, dependable, and commercially feasible means of travel.

Willhite was born 22 November 1892 to Lillian Madison Zabel and Charles Zabel on the family ranch near Box Elder. A case of measles severely impaired her hearing, and her widowed father enrolled her at the State School for the Deaf in Sioux Falls when she was seven years old. Shortly thereafter, she became the foster daughter of Dr. Leonard C. and Dollie Mead of Yankton, who tutored her and taught her to read lips. Following a short-lived marriage to Dr. Frank V. Willhite, she did clerical work in Pierre and Sioux Falls.

On 17 November 1927, the thirty-four-year-old Willhite began actively pursuing a long-held interest in airplanes by taking her first flying lesson from Harold Tennant at the Dakota Airlines Flying School near Renner. She soloed on 13 January 1928, after completing thirteen hours of instruction. When she received her private pilot's license in 1930, she became both the first licensed woman pilot in South Dakota and, apparently, the first deaf pilot licensed to fly in the United States. Between 1928 and 1932, Willhite pursued a busy schedule as a stunt pilot at fairs, air shows, and airport dedications. Her silver-and-blue Alexander Eaglerock biplane, which Charles Zabel purchased for her, was readily recognized by its extended lower wing and the word "Pard," her father's nickname, painted on both sides of the fuselage.

In April 1934, while working as office manager at Renner Air Service, Willhite received a commercial pilot's license. During World War II, she spent several months at Hill Field in Ogden, Utah, serving as a ground-school instructor and an inspector of B-19 military aircraft propellers. Willhite helped to plan the first national air races for women and was a charter member of the "Ninety-Nine" Club, a prestigious national organization formed in 1930 for licensed female pilots. She founded the South Dakota chapter of the group in 1941.

Nellie Willhite died on 2 September 1991 at the age of ninety-eight and is buried in the Mead family plot at the Yankton City Cemetery. Her airplane is currently displayed at the Southern Museum of Flight in Birmingham, Alabama.

by CLAYTON F. SMITH

Copyright of South Dakota History is the property of South Dakota State Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

All illustrations in this issue are property of the South Dakota State Historical Society except for those on the following pages: pp. 103, 107, 108, 111, 119, 120, from South Dakota National Guard Historical Resource Collection, Beulah Williams Library, Northern State University, Aberdeen, S.Dak.; pp. 125, 126, 128, 130, from Presentation Heights Archives, Aberdeen, S.Dak.; p. 135, from Helen J. Bergh, Aberdeen, S.Dak.; p. 180, from Ken Hirsch, Sioux Falls, S.Dak.