

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

Spring 2013

Volume 48, Number 1

A Monument to Freedom,  
a Monument to All:

Restoring the  
*Johann Christoph Friedrich von  
Schiller Memorial*  
in Como Park

*Colin Nelson-Dusek*

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*Rooted in Community*

One History of Service:  
The Guild of Catholic Women and Guild Incorporated

*Hayla Drake*

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Internationally known artist Jason Najarak's "Ladder of Hope" mural, the centerpiece of Guild Incorporated's donor wall, was inspired by others whose "genius and mental illness played out in many ways." Najarak gifted the organization with his painting. Photo courtesy of Guild Incorporated.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 48, Number 1

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations  
to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program  
of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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**Correction:** In the Winter 2013 issue, which included the 2012 Donor Recognition Report, Myrna Weyer was incorrectly identified in the Report as deceased. On the contrary, she is very much alive. We greatly regret this error.

## A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue brings us a diverse group of articles. We trace the history of the Guild of Catholic Women and Guild Incorporated: a compelling story of helping St. Paul residents through community support, especially housing. We watch as the Como Park statue of the German writer and philosopher, Schiller, is restored and rededicated. And we thrill to the airborne adventures of Phoebe Omlie, a pioneering aviator and parachute jumper who got her start in Ramsey County. As we welcome Chad Roberts, the new President of RCHS, I also want to thank John Lindley, our editor, who has recently served as Interim Executive Director. John kept us moving forward as an organization as he also handled responsibilities editing this magazine. We are thankful for his administrative experience and initiative, but happy to have him back applying his full expertise to this great publication.

*Anne Cowie,*  
Chair, Editorial Board

## Her Sky-high Career Started Here

# Aviation Pioneer: Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie

*Roger Bergerson*

Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie (1902–1975) was the first woman to do a lot of things in American aviation: hold a federal pilot’s license; fly over the Rocky Mountains in a light plane; and serve as a top government aeronautics official. But on this Sunday in July 1921, she was just eighteen-year-old Phoebe Fairgrave, standing on the wing of a plane high over Snelling and Larpenteur Avenues in Rose Township, ready to attempt a world parachute jumping record for women.

While the crowd below at Curtiss Northwest Airport strained to see the speck in the sky and sweltered in the nearly 100-degree heat, Fairgrave was startled by how cold it was at nearly three miles of altitude. Weighing little more than 90 pounds and barely five feet tall, she wore a helmet and goggles, an aviator’s coat, a silk shirt, riding breeches, and basketball shoes with suction soles to help grip the wing. Fairgrave had an inner tube wrapped around her middle in case she landed in water, because she didn’t know how to swim.

At the controls of the big, red Curtiss Oriole biplane was ruggedly handsome Vernon Omlie, who in less than a year would become her husband. It had taken the plane over an hour to make the climb. A companion aircraft monitored the situation. Fairgrave stepped off the wing at 15,200 feet and began her record-setting descent, her goggles icing over at one point. Twenty minutes later, she landed in a wheat field a mile south of New Brighton.

“I wasn’t afraid to jump,” she told the *Minneapolis Tribune* afterward, “but my hands were so cold that I hated to walk out on the wings. But I got out all right, and fastened on my chute. Then I just let go and the wind carried me off. For the first 100 feet I fell like a flash. Then the chute opened out and I began to swing back and forth through the air, as if I were in a swing. The motion, and the rapid change from icy cold to heat, sickened

me at first. But at 12,000 feet I began to feel better.

“At 9,000 feet I struck an air pocket and dropped quickly again, but was soon out of it. The planes kept circling around me and made me feel less lonesome.

“I dropped to the ground so easily that I wasn’t even shaken. It was just like jumping from a 10-foot wall. The planes couldn’t land, but an automobile picked me up and I rode back to the field.”<sup>1</sup>

### Roots in St. Paul

She’d done it, set the record, and before long Fairgrave and Omlie left to barnstorm across the country. For years afterward, though, Phoebe continued to refer to St. Paul as “home.” The Fairgrave family moved to St. Paul from Des Moines, Iowa, in 1914, when Phoebe was twelve, and initially settled at 775 Cedar Street, just north of the State Capitol. Andrew Fairgrave ran a saloon in downtown St. Paul that became a soda shop during Prohibition. His daughter attended Madison School nearby and showed signs early on of an appetite for action.

In 1967, on the anniversary of Phoebe’s historic jump, Betty Roney of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* interviewed several of Fairgrave’s childhood friends for her “Between You & Me by Mary E.” column. They had fond memories of a little girl in pigtails. “Always a tomboy,” recalled Harold Ruttenberg, St. Paul attorney. “If there was a ball game going, or a wrestling match, she’d be in the thick of it.”



Phoebe Fairgrave ready for action about 1920. Photo courtesy of the Phoebe Omlie Collection, Memphis (Tenn.) Public Library.

“We used to play where Bethesda Hospital is now,” added Harold Dahlquist, a retired real estate salesman. “The best place of all though, was the corner of Sherburne and Cedar, where Governor



Merriam used to have his tennis court. Or we'd play on Cedar, which was paved with cobblestones and pretty rough. And Phoebe was right in the thick of things, if there was any kind of a game going."<sup>2</sup>

From Madison, Fairgrave moved on to Mechanic Arts High School, just south-east of the Capitol. There her fellow juniors elected her class president in 1919, the first girl selected for such a leadership position. In a student publication, a classmate commented, ". . . we felt that Phoebe was competent and had enough executive ability to manage the class successfully."<sup>3</sup> She liked to write and act in school plays and her flair for story telling and sense of drama served her well in the years ahead. She also possessed a level of assertiveness and self-confidence that would lead her to challenge contemporary assumptions about a woman's role in society.

At some point, Fairgrave became intrigued with aviation, and it has been suggested that the flamboyant Ruth Law served as her role model.<sup>4</sup> Starting in 1917, Law made several appearances in St. Paul that Fairgrave could have witnessed. In 1920, for example, the aviatrix performed her specialty, a night flight with fireworks, at the Minnesota State Fair. But the transformational event for Fairgrave seems to have been associated with the September 1919 visit to the Twin Cities by President Woodrow Wilson, who was on a whirlwind tour to build popular support for ratification of the League of Nations treaty.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported on the morning of September 9 that four planes from Curtiss Northwest Airport would fly overhead to salute the president that day.<sup>5</sup> A *St. Paul Dispatch* reporter rode along—with Vernon Omlie, as it turned out—as the planes swooped low over the Capitol building, where Wilson was addressing the Legislature.<sup>6</sup> Accounts vary in detail, but the common thread is that Fairgrave looked up from Mechanic Arts to see planes overhead and was inspired by the spectacle. As a magazine writer depicted it, "The planes zoomed right over the high school building, so close that it seemed they must strike the roof. Phoebe Fairgrave was thrilled as she had never been before. 'I



*Phoebe, wearing her trusty inner tube, alongside her new pilot, Vernon Omlie. Photo courtesy of the Phoebe Omlie Collection, Memphis (Tenn.) Public Library.*

hadn't given a thought to aviation until that day,' she told me, 'but suddenly, as I watched those planes, I wanted to fly.'"<sup>7</sup> Little did she know that was her future husband overhead.

Captivated by the notion of flight, soon afterward she took the Como-Harriet streetcar out to the Snelling Avenue stop and walked out to Curtiss Northwest Field. It had opened in the summer of 1919 and though primitive by today's standards, was the first full-service airport in the region and one of the first in the United States. Bill Kidder, the airport manager, had acquired a trainload of government surplus Curtiss Jennys, biplanes

that had been used to train pilots for World War I. He had paid almost nothing for the planes but was selling them for \$3,000 apiece and up.<sup>8</sup>

### **Phoebe Gets Her Chance**

By 1920, the Fairgrave family had moved to a home on Fuller Avenue, east of Lexington Avenue in St. Paul. Following her graduation from Mechanic Arts in June of that year, Fairgrave took acting lessons, worked in an office and at the candy counter in the Emporium Department Store downtown, but she did not stick to anything for long. In the meantime, she had become something of



*Phoebe strikes a dramatic pose for the camera while wing-walking high over Rose Township in rural Ramsey County during the 1920s. Photo courtesy of the Phoebe Omlie Collection, Memphis (Tenn.) Public Library.*

a fixture at Curtiss Northwest on weekends, though mostly ignored by the pilots and other personnel. Fairgrave decided that one sure way to be taken seriously by the flying fraternity was to buy a plane, which she did in early 1921. The story she told repeatedly over the years was that she used an inheritance from her grandfather to make the \$3,500 purchase. But in a memoir she confessed that it was a loan from her mother, kept secret from Mr. Fairgrave.<sup>9</sup> Wherever it came from, it was a substantial sum, well over \$40,000 in today's dollars.

Years later, both Kidder and his chief pilot, Ray Miller, portrayed themselves as having been quite chivalrous toward the young lady during this period and concerned for her well-being, especially when she started talking about parachute jumping. Kidder recalled, "I had a very enthusiastic salesman working for me. One day [Phoebe Fairgrave] called me up and said 'Mr. Kidder when are the boys ever going to teach me parachute jumping?' I inquired who she was and where

she lived and made an appointment with her at my field. She told me that this salesman . . . had told her how much money there was in parachute work and he had sold her a \$3,000 plane promising to teach her to jump. She had inherited her money from a relative. She was a very pretty little girl, not over 100 pounds. I tried to dissuade her, begged her to take her money back and give up the idea. She said 'No, I'm going to parachute if I have to get a pilot to take me up and jump alone.' About six of my pilots were around and I put the proposition up to them. All of them turned it down except one, a very cautious, serious-minded, extremely careful chap and he said, 'Mr. Kidder, I'll pack her chute, take her up, get her out all right and see that she doesn't get hurt and maybe after her first jump she will have had enough.'<sup>10</sup>

In what is no doubt a mixture of fact and fiction, Kidder's "careful chap" was Vernon Omlie. A native of Grafton, N.D., north of Grand Forks, the twenty-six-year-old Omlie had served with

the Minnesota National Guard on the Mexican border in 1916 and 1917. Joining the Army Air Service, he learned to fly, became a training instructor and reached the rank of captain.

In his own version of the events, Chief Pilot Miller played the pivotal role in shepherding Fairgrave: "She was just able to lug a big parachute into the hangar," he recounted. "She had on a [flight] uniform, where she got it to fit her, I'll never know. But she wanted to make a parachute jump. She had made no arrangement for the ride and I questioned her to find out what experience she had. I discovered she had none whatsoever, had never been in a plane before. But she had much more guts than that tiny body would seem able to hold." Miller said he instructed Fairgrave to exercise and lift weights to develop strength in her hands and arms so the propeller back draft wouldn't toss her off the wing as soon as she stepped on. And he claimed to be the one who assigned pilot Omlie to work with her.<sup>11</sup>

Fairgrave herself did not mention Omlie in that initial encounter, but she depicted Miller putting her through what amounted to an aerial hazing. As the *Minneapolis Tribune* reported, upon finding out that she had never been in a plane before, Miller took her up and went through a series of climbs, dives and other maneuvers. “Well, how’d you like it?” he grinned. “Fine,” she replied, “when shall we do it again?” ‘I did feel a little bit tight in the throat,’ she confesses nowadays, when she speaks of that incident,” the paper noted.<sup>12</sup>

Charlie Hardin was a pioneer balloonist and parachute developer whose company was located in Minneapolis. The 1921 flying season got off to an early start at Curtiss Northwest Airport and in March Hardin tested a new ‘chute there with a large crowd watching. It was Hardin who provided Fairgrave with the parachute she used for her first jump.<sup>13</sup> That came on April 17, 1921. The next day, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported, “She has been doing ‘Wing-walking’ stunts all spring, but could not be satisfied until she had experienced the sensation of ‘chuting.’”<sup>14</sup>

## Her First Jump

Fairgrave later wrote about that first jump for the *Mechanic Arts* student magazine. “. . . while the parachute was opening, it reminded me of a huge blue and white tulip opening for the day (for my chute is made up of blue and white silk),” which just happened to be the *Mechanic Arts*’ school colors. She wound up dangling unhurt from a tree.<sup>15</sup>

A few weeks later, Fairgrave introduced what would become a crowd-pleasing staple, the double-parachute jump. The jump was made from about 2,000 feet, the first chute opening immediately. She surreptitiously cut it loose after a descent of about 600 feet—causing the crowd to gasp as she fell for several seconds before the second chute opened just in time to save the day. At the conclusion of her first double-chute jump at Curtiss Northwest Airport, she landed in a small lake. Fortunately, the wind kept the chute open and it acted like a sail and dragged her to shore. It was then that Fairgrave began wearing the inner tube, though she never landed in a lake again.

“The double parachute drop is the most attractive for the people on the ground and it is also the most remunerative to the jumper,” Fairgrave wrote in the *Mechanic Arts* magazine. “On account of these two advantages, I do this jump almost exclusively in my exhibition work.”<sup>16</sup>

That same spring of 1921, Omlie quit Kidder’s staff to work with Fairgrave and the two began to tour. They formed a partnership with Glen Messer, an established barnstormer from Des Moines, and developed a repertoire of stunts. One of them involved transferring Fairgrave from one plane to another and as Charles E. Planck noted in his book, *Women With Wings*, “This act became one of their most spectacular and caused many a yokel to sunburn his tonsils watching it.” Some of these stunts were filmed by movie cameras and footage of Fairgrave and Omlie appeared in the *Perils of Pauline* cliff-hanger serial.

Fairgrave was back in the Twin Cities in early July to prepare for her attempt to break the world record set the previous year in Chicago, Ill., by Mabel Cody, a niece of Buffalo Bill. She made the

rounds of the local newspapers to generate advance publicity, possibly at the suggestion of Curtiss Northwest’s Kidder, who often used that approach in promoting events. The *Minneapolis Tribune* described her as “a quiet unassuming youngster in simple pongee sport dress.”

The attempt at the world record was made late on the afternoon of July 10, 1921. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported that “thousands of people” lined the fence at the airport. Riding with Omlie and Fairgrave in the Curtiss Oriole, a three-seater, was an official recorder for the Minneapolis Aero Club. The jump was a sensational success and newspapers bestowed sobriquets on Fairgrave such as “darling of the skies.” Vernon took Phoebe to dinner at the Radisson Hotel in Minneapolis, their first date.<sup>17</sup> Despite the fact that only a little more than three months had passed since her first parachute jump, Fairgrave saw a wide world of aviation beckoning beyond St. Paul. During the next decade, she returned from time to time, mostly on business. But her parents eventually returned to Des Moines to live and her ties to St. Paul were fewer.



Whenever there was an air show at Curtiss Northwest Field, near the state fairgrounds, people flocked to see it. In this photo looking north, the airfield’s lone hangar is near the center with *Larpenteur Avenue* crossing the scene behind the hangar. *Hoyt Avenue* runs from left to right across the bottom of the photo with automobiles scattered along that roadway and more cars parked along *Snelling Avenue* running north and south on the left. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame.

## Barnstorming

Despite the public's growing fascination with aviation, the barnstorming era was not an easy one in which to make a buck. Aerial daredevil shows known as flying circuses abounded. Charles Lindbergh started out with one, wing-walking and performing odd jobs. Charles "Speed" Holman, who played a pivotal role in popularizing flight in Minnesota and the region, flew for a time with the *St. Paul Dispatch* Flying Circus. Glenn Messer's Flying Circus was well known in the Des Moines area and Fairgrave and Omlie rejoined it after her record-setting jump. Later that same July during a Des Moines air show, she suffered her first serious accident when her parachute carried her into high-voltage lines. She suffered burns on her face, arm and hand that left life-long scars.<sup>18</sup> Working with Messer, they continued to develop and add stunts to their act. Fairgrave made a three-parachute jump, climbed from the wing of one plane to another, did the Charleston on a wing and hung by her teeth from the undercarriage.

In mid-February 1922, Fairgrave and Omlie married in a ceremony at the Fairgrave family home on Fuller Avenue. This was said to come as a surprise to their friends, a rather obtuse group, it would seem. "Why shouldn't I marry him?" was her rhetorical question to a reporter. "Lt. Omlie was the only aviator who didn't tell me that I was a silly kid. . . and he was the only one who would take me up to go after the record. Now I'm sure that I have a husband who won't interfere with my professional career—and I must jump."<sup>19</sup> Immediately after the ceremony in the Fairgrave home, the two left for Chicago to attempt to line up contracts for the coming season at a meeting of the International Association of State Fair Secretaries.

For that flying season, they joined forces with Charlie Hardin and his wife, Kathryn. The combined flying circus appeared at an air derby at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds in early summer. There, Phoebe and a partner parachuted simultaneously from two planes and landed in the pasture north of the Fairgrounds in view of the packed grandstand.<sup>20</sup> It appar-



*Phoebe Omlie with her plane, Miss Moline, and trophies that she won in the first Women's National Air Derby in 1929. Humorist Will Rogers dubbed that race the "Powder Puff Derby." Photo courtesy of the Phoebe Omlie Collection, Memphis (Tenn.) Public Library.*

ently was the last daredevil performance by Fairgrave Omlie in St. Paul.

The Omlies worked their way along the fair and carnival circuit that summer, finishing up in Memphis, Tenn., tired and broke. Back at Curtiss Northwest Airport, Vernon had participated in Bill Kidder's pioneering use of planes for freight hauling, crop spraying, forest-fire spotting, and aerial photography.<sup>21</sup> Omlie saw the end of the barnstorming era approaching—the federal government began regulating flying for the first time in 1927—and thought that the commercial applications of aviation looked like a much more appealing way to make a living. Consequently, the Omlies decided to establish their own "fixed base" airport, leasing a field outside Memphis that became the first commercial airport in the region and home to their newly formed Mid-South Airways, Inc.<sup>22</sup>

## Promoting Aviation

If this new enterprise were to be successful, however, the public and its elected officials would have to begin looking at aviation as something more than a source of thrills and entertainment. That was a mindset that proved difficult for the Omlies to change until the Great Flood of 1927, one of the worst natural disasters of the twentieth century. After months of heavy rain, the Mississippi River burst its

banks, spreading 80 miles wide at some points. People were stranded on rooftops in Tennessee and Arkansas. The Omlies and two of their pilots volunteered to aid in disaster relief.

"They patrolled the levees, spotting and reporting sand boils which threatened new disaster; they landed on narrow strips of high ground with precious medicines and supplies; they flew the mail between Memphis and Little Rock; and they exulted in the hourly and daily opportunities to prove that the airplane was practical, either on wheels or on floats."<sup>23</sup>

Bolstered by all the positive publicity that resulted, business began to pick up at the Omlies' airport. They sold more airplanes and taught more students to fly. Vernon's most famous student was undoubtedly the Nobel Prize-winning author William Faulkner, who is said to have based the main characters in his 1935 novel, *Pylon*, on the Omlies.<sup>24</sup>

Phoebe taught, too, in the early years. One day, however, a young man froze in fear at the controls and she could not right the plane, which went into a tail-spin and crashed. According to Amelia Earhart, Fairgrave Omlie drastically curtailed her instruction after that, carrying a scar from the accident for the rest of her life.<sup>25</sup> She made her last parachute jump in 1927. At the mid-point in that year, Fairgrave Omlie became the first woman

to be issued a transport pilot's license by the U.S. Department of Commerce. This meant that she could carry passengers and freight for hire cross-country. (In 1933, she earned the first mechanic's license awarded to a woman.)

Her growing reputation and flair for generating newspaper publicity attracted the attention of the Mono-Aircraft Corporation of Moline, Ill., which hired Fairgrave Omlie as a consultant and sales representative. Its Monocoupe, one of the first planes built for private pilots, was a two-seat, single-wing craft with an enclosed cabin. The snappy design and performance were making a big hit with the flying public and Fairgrave Omlie began to use the Monocoupe to race competitively.

The first of these events was the 1928 National Reliability Air Tour for the Edsel Ford Trophy, named for the president of the Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford's eldest son was enthusiastic about the development of an aircraft industry and directed the company's acquisition of an airplane manufacturer in 1925. Ford staged what became known as the Reliability Tours from 1925 to 1931 to convince the public that air travel was safe and dependable and not solely the domain of daredevils and stunt flyers. The tours covered thousands of miles around the continental United States and were front-page news at every stop.

When the 1928 tour departed the Dearborn, Mich., airport at the end of June, Fairgrave Omlie was in the field, the first woman to compete. The route proceeded south, a few hundred miles at a time, into Texas, across the Southwest to San Diego, Calif., up the coast to Washington State and across the northern tier, reaching St. Paul's new downtown airport on July 24. By this time, her black-and-orange Monocoupe was dubbed "Chiggers," after the insect pests she had encountered along the way.

St. Paul provided a warm reception, including a welcoming parade and accommodations at the St. Paul Hotel, where an entire floor had been reserved for the competitors. It was an indication of what women fliers were up against when a headline in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* declared, "Phoebe Fairgrave



*Vernon, left, and Phoebe Omlie in the mid-1930s. Photo courtesy of the Phoebe Omlie Collection, Memphis (Tenn.) Public Library.*

Omlie of St. Paul No 'Cry-baby,' Says Detroit Expert." "I'm not in the race to win, but I want this buggy to finish," she told a reporter as she tended to the Monocoupe, the least powerful plane in the race. Reporters invariably described the appearance of female pilots and Fairgrave Omlie was said to be wearing "low shoes, golf socks, white knickers and a white vest."<sup>26</sup> Finish she did, and racing success lay ahead. But first she would experience the worst accident of her career. On the weekend of October 13-14, 1928, she flew her Monocoupe to Paragould, Ark., northwest of Memphis,

to appear at the dedication of the local airport.

While flying a passenger at low altitude, her controls jammed, *Chiggers* slammed into the ground and was destroyed. Fairgrave-Omlie broke both legs, suffered burns on both arms and lacerations on her face. Her passenger suffered a broken leg and skull fracture. Vernon flew Phoebe back to Memphis for treatment and a long recuperation. In fact, she was still walking with a cane the following May (1929) when she arrived in a new Monocoupe to take part in the second annual St. Paul-to-Winnipeg



Good Will Air Tour. “I ran out of altitude,” was her breezy response to a *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reporter’s inquiry as to what had happened. “Why should one accident bother a flier any more than it would an automobile driver? People don’t quit driving cars because they have an accident.”<sup>27</sup> Fairgrave Omlie resumed racing and in August 1929 won the light plane class in the first Women’s National Air Derby, flying her new Monocoupe, *Miss Moline*. This was the race from Santa Monica, Calif., to Cleveland, Ohio, that humorist Will Rogers dubbed the “Powder Puff Derby.” Newspaper reporters, too, tended to trivialize the women pilots, dubbing them “ladybirds,” “angels,” and “sweethearts of the air.” In contrast, the women themselves were deeply serious about what they were doing. As the competition concluded, a group that included Fairgrave Omlie and Earhart founded the Ninety-Nines, named for the number of charter members of an international organization of female aviators that is still active today.

Fairgrave Omlie won again in 1930 at the Dixie Derby and the following year triumphed in the Transcontinental Handicap Air Derby from Santa Monica to Cleveland. This was the race in which women and men pilots competed together for the first time. Fairgrave Omlie’s first prize for that win was \$3,000 and a luxury Cord Cabriolet automobile. She promptly retired from racing.

### Aviation and Politics

When the new Memphis airport opened in 1929, Mid-South Airways was acquired by the operator, Curtiss Wright, which then hired Vernon as its chief pilot and operations manager. Phoebe’s race earnings helped Vernon reacquire the company in 1931 and it appeared that the two would settle down to run the business together.<sup>28</sup>

But all that changed when she was invited by Eleanor Roosevelt to campaign for her husband during his 1932 presidential bid. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was known to be aviation-minded and Fairgrave Omlie believed he would be supportive of programs to help private airport operators and pilots. *Miss Moline* was repainted appropriately and she pro-



*Phoebe Omlie, left, met with Amelia Earhart, the celebrated pilot, in Miami on May 31, 1937, the day before Earhart left on her ill-fated around-the-world flight. Photo courtesy of the Ninety-Nines Museum of Women Pilots, Oklahoma City, Okla.*

ceeded to fly thousands of miles across a dozen states, including Minnesota, ferrying speakers to campaign stops.

With FDR’s victory, Fairgrave Omlie started to think that perhaps she could do more to advance the cause of aviation by working within the federal government and she lobbied for a job in Washington, D.C. In late 1933 she was appointed to

the agency that decades later became the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. She was the first woman to hold an executive position in federal aeronautics. As part of this assignment, she worked with the Works Progress Administration to improve navigational markings for private pilots, which included painting the names of towns in



In 1936 Phoebe campaigned around the country in support of President Franklin Roosevelt's reelection. Here she is seen with Stella Akin, right, the administration's assistant attorney general, ready for another flight. Photo courtesy of the Minneapolis Public Library.

large letters on the tops of prominent structures. She was also involved in the effort to develop a low-cost, easy-to-fly plane. In 1935, Eleanor Roosevelt named her among “eleven women whose achievements make it safe to say the world is progressing.”<sup>29</sup> Phoebe’s world, however, was about to come apart.

Back in Memphis, Vernon had continued teaching and flying, further burnishing his reputation as a rock-steady aviator who always put safety first. During his long career, he never cracked up a plane. So it was ironic as well as tragic when, on August 5, 1936, the commercial airliner on which he was traveling as a passenger crashed in the fog while attempting to land in St. Louis, Mo., killing all eight people on board. This was front-page news in the Twin Cities because Phoebe and Vernon were still remembered locally and because it was a major air disaster for the time. Newspapers of the era often stretched the truth a bit to make a connection with a prominent person and the *Minneapolis Star* claimed that Phoebe had been a res-

ident of Minneapolis and “learned to fly here in the early ’20s.”<sup>30</sup>

Devastated, Fairgrave Omlie resigned from her job in Washington, D.C. and returned to Memphis, although she campaigned for FDR again during his 1936 campaign. In the late 1930s, she worked successfully to secure public funding for aviation training in Tennessee public schools, returning to Washington, D.C., in 1941 to a post with the Civil Aeronautics Authority, where she directed a program to train aviation ground personnel.

With the outbreak of World War II, the Tennessee Bureau of Aeronautics borrowed Fairgrave Omlie to run a short-lived effort to train women as flight instructors to replace the men away on active duty. She answered any doubters with characteristic spunk: “Women taught men to walk, they can teach them to fly.”<sup>31</sup>

### After the War

In the post-World War II years, her work seems to have involved more mundane duties and apparently she began to view

increasing government regulation as a menace. As a result, she resigned her post in 1952 at the age of 50. “Phoebe Omlie Quits—Woman Flier To Be Farmer,” was the headline in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in 1952. She was said to be leaving the Civil Aeronautics Authority because the federal government was “socializing” civil aviation. The article recapped how the pilot got her start in St. Paul, including an account of her record-setting parachute jump.<sup>32</sup>

Subsequently, a cattle farm in Mississippi, south of Memphis, did not work out, probably because of Fairgrave Omlie’s lack of experience. Nor was the hotel/café enterprise that followed any more successful. She was back in Memphis by 1961. There she eked out a living with speaking engagements, railing against government over-regulation of aviation, as well as the perceived threat of socialism and communism. Gradually the invitations stopped coming.

By the time *St. Paul Pioneer Press* columnist Betty Roney first wrote about Fairgrave Omlie in 1967, her whereabouts were no longer known, at least to

those in her old home town, although she was rumored to be living in Washington, D.C. Roney asked for help from Al Eisele, then Washington, D.C., correspondent for the *Pioneer Press* (and later press secretary for Vice President Walter Mondale). He found Phoebe living in the nation's capital and lobbying against federal control of education.

In a subsequent telephone conversation with Roney, Fairgrave Omlie was as quotable as ever. She talked about political goals, but also reminisced about her high school days when she took shop classes at Mechanic Arts. "I still can drive a nail," she said. And she cited the productive relationship she had always enjoyed with the press. "If it hadn't been for newspaper people, aviation would never have gotten out of the three-cornered pants stage,"

she said. Would she ever consider coming back home to St. Paul? "I'll go anywhere if people want me to speak," said Fairgrave Omlie. "Anything I can do, I'll do. I'm a crusader, you know."<sup>33</sup>

But soon, she disappeared again. Fairgrave Omlie became a recluse, spending her last days in a seedy boarding house in Indianapolis, Ind., where the lifelong smoker was diagnosed with lung cancer. She died on July 17, 1975, in Indianapolis and her remains were taken to Memphis for burial next to Vernon.

Fairgrave Omlie was inducted into the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame in 1988 and the Tennessee Aviation Hall of Fame twenty years later. In June 1982, a new air traffic control tower at the Memphis International Airport was dedicated to Phoebe and Vernon.

Her life may have ended sadly, but it's worth remembering her glory years, which were glorious indeed. Although Phoebe never achieved Earhart's fame, she certainly was at least her equal as a pilot. Maybe one of her childhood friends put it best when he declared, "There was nothing that girl couldn't do in an airplane."<sup>34</sup>

*Roger Bergerson first learned about Phoebe Fairgrave when he wrote a history of Curtiss Northwest Airport, Winging it at a Country Crossroads. He is particularly grateful for the help given him for this article by Janann Sherman, professor and chair of the history department at the University of Memphis and author of the definitive biography, Walking on Air: The Aerial Adventures of Phoebe Omlie.*

## Endnotes

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*From August to October of 2012, the Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller Memorial in St. Paul's Como Park underwent restoration. Here the restored statue once more welcomes visitors to the park. For more on Schiller and the restoration of this sculpture, see page 11. Photo courtesy of Robert Muschewske.*