

# Amelia Earhart in Arizona

McNeal, Arizona, has never been a hot spot for celebrity sightings. But one day in September, almost nine decades ago, one of the most famous women in the world dropped out of the sky. Literally.

September 12, 1928, dawned hot and still in McNeal. Farmers worked their fields in the small agricultural community about 20 miles northwest of Douglas. Members of the Ladies Aid Society prepared for their Wednesday lunch meeting. Then, a strange noise caught the attention of everyone in town.

Fourth-grader Fred Stolp looked out the schoolhouse window and watched, open-mouthed, as a blue-and-silver biplane, the first plane anyone in town had ever seen, circled overhead.

“We were beside ourselves,” Stolp recounted in a 1992 story in *Cochise Quarterly*. “It was almost like watching a miracle.”

Kids jumped out of the windows and raced to see the plane. Alva Rich Porter froze while pumping gas at McNeal Mercantile. Arnie Hongo, a local farmer, grabbed his camera and came running.

The plane sputtered as it banked, then touched down in a field studded with tumbleweeds and mesquites. In



Famed aviator Amelia Earhart strikes a pose after landing in the small town of McNeal in 1928. | BISBEE MINING & HISTORICAL MUSEUM

front of a stunned crowd, the pilot climbed out wearing a skirt and close-fitting hat.

“A woman?” Stolp thought. “You have

to be kidding!”

It had been three months since Amelia Earhart’s trip across the Atlantic had thrust her into celebrity. She had just completed the manuscript of her book, *20 Hours, 40 Minutes*, about that flight.

This trip would mark the first time a woman flew solo across the country and back, but as Earhart wrote in her autobiography, *The Fun of It*, she thought of it as a vacation, “a minor adventure in vagabonding by air and a relaxation from writer’s cramp.”

Running low on fuel, Earhart made the landing. The mesquites may have punctured her tire. More likely, an earlier patch failed. In either case, Earhart lunched with the Ladies Aid Society while Porter and Lewis Burton refueled the plane and repaired her tire, writing their names inside. It took three tries to get airborne again, Earhart’s tires twice more going flat.

“She circled McNeal, waving to us,” Stolp recalled, “then headed off into the southeast,” leaving the residents of McNeal with a memory as lasting and ethereal as the sky.

— KATHY MONTGOMERY

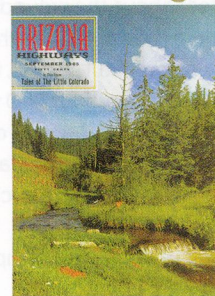
## this month in history

- Tucson District No. 1 hires its first Chinese-American teacher, Mae Don, on September 6, 1941.
- The Hoover Dam generates electricity for the first time on September 11, 1936, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt presses the button to start its operation.
- Bubonic plague makes its first appearance in Arizona on September 18, 1929, in Yuma.
- Prisoners overflow the Nogales jail on September 22, 1917, as people from across the country trying to escape the

draft for World War I are caught in the border city.

■ The El Conquistador Hotel in Tucson faces the start of its demolition on September 25, 1968, 40 years after it opened. Later, the location becomes Tucson’s first covered shopping mall.

## ARIZONA HIGHWAYS 50 Years Ago



The Little Colorado River, which starts in the White Mountains and eventually joins with the Colorado River, was the focus of *Arizona Highways*' September 1965 issue. It included features on the Lower Gorge, Lyman Dam and the history of the river and its people.