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Arlene Davis: Lakewood Aviatrix

By Mazie M. Adams

Lakewood can boast many exciting and famous people, but perhaps one of the most interesting and innovative was Alma Arlene Davis. Her flying career spanned over 35 years. She and her husband Max lived at 13410 Lake Avenue for many years, before “retiring” to the Lake Shore Hotel.

At the tender age of 16, Arlene Palsgraff ran off and married 18-year-old Max T. Davis, much to their parents’ chagrin. Arlene helped her husband in his new butcher and meat packing business, Peerless Packing Co., which quickly prospered. She spent her free time in a wide variety of activities, including ballet, skating, swimming, horses, golf, painting and tennis. In 1931, Max announced that he had purchased an airplane. Wanting to “have the same interests my husband did,” Arlene earned her private pilot license in 1931, a year before her husband did. “See how easy it is,” she said to her surprised spouse.



Arlene Davis in 1932

She quickly progressed. Early in her career she participated in many air races and aviation competitions, including her first air race in Dayton in 1934 (which she won) and the 1936 Miami-Havana International Air race. In

1938, she was the only woman pilot in the MacFadden Race from New York to Miami and she was the only woman to finish in the money in the Bendix Race from Los Angeles to New York in 1938.

She went on to capture many firsts during her long and distinguished aviation career: first woman to receive a 4-M rating qualifying

her to pilot multi-engine airplanes up to a gross weight of 10,000 pounds over land and sea; first private pilot, man or woman, to receive an instrument rating which qualified her to fly blind; first woman to receive the Veteran’s Pilot Award; first woman to receive the Elder Statesman of Aviation award.

Flying and Popular Aviation magazine called Davis America’s outstanding woman pilot, going on to say “It’s all the result of her persistence, her dogged stick-to-itiveness, her refusal to give up which has kept her digging persistently into aviation text books. It has kept her plugging and droning on monotonously in the air, practicing landings, figure-eights, 720’s, stalls and what-not, or climbing high into the blue in a Beechcraft,



Arlene Davis - January 1932

Arlene Davis in 1932

Spartan, tri-motored Ford or a twin-engined Sikorsky S-38, while the women of her Cleveland set spent their time at bridge-teas, garden parties or matinees.”

Being a female pilot was not easy. Mrs. Davis remarked in 1940, “Don’t think any woman pilot ever got anything handed to her in flying. She’s got to fight every bit of the way. Men may be chivalrous in anything else—but not in flying. Many of them—and especially some of the old timers among the inspectors—resent women in flying and a lot of them take the critical ‘you show me’ attitude toward women flyers. They’ll demand a lot more precision and perfection from a woman than from a man. Believe me, you’ve got to fight every inch of the way if you’re a woman pilot.”

During WWII, she taught Navy and Army cadets instrument flying, the only woman instructor so licensed. Her Army instructing was done at Baldwin-Wallace College. She served as president Eisenhower’s aviation chairman for Ohio and as chairman of Operation Skywatch for Civil Defense in Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky.

Mrs. Davis advised her fellow female pilots to “Be as feminine as you can. A man is quicker to accept an attractive woman as a competitor. He’ll forgive a woman more readily for beating him—if she is good looking... Women, when they compete with men in occupations usually considered masculine, often ‘go masculine’ in their clothes. Flat heels, mannish suits, an unpowdered nose are definitely a mistake.”

An article in Philadelphia Inquire stated that “Mrs. Davis practices the philosophy she preaches. Comely and smartly dressed, she looked more like a screen star than a pilot who has just flown here from her Cleveland home. She can discuss blind flying from her experience of ‘200 hours under the hood’ and she can talk just as enthusiastically about pretty clothes or make-up.



Arlene Davis held very strong opinions about women who fly. She disapproved of some women flyers who wore outrageous costumes at air meets, saying, “Every woman ought to keep herself as feminine as possible. That’s the way men like ‘em. I don’t believe men flyers resent women flyers half as much as they resent the flying clothes some women insist on wearing. I always wear woman’s clothes in flying—even in the Bendix. It’s never necessary for a woman flyer to get blacked and greased up.”

In 1950, she flew her Beech Travel Air across the Atlantic by the northern route, toured Europe in the airplane, then flew home via Dakar and South America. In 1951, she enrolled as a coed at Baldwin-Wallace College, studying electrical engineering. Though well past the age of the traditional coed, she joined Delta Zeta sorority while a student there. In 1959, she and navigator Clay Donges flew 20,000 miles across the North and South Atlantic in a twin-engine Travel Air. It was the first time a private plane flew the North and South Atlantic in one trip. The flight took 13 days.

Arlene Davis worked diligently to encourage girls to become more aviation minded. She was a national adviser for the Wing

Scouts of the Girl Scouts of America. Believing the best way to learn aviation is to build model planes, Arlene Davis was extremely active in model plane activities in Ohio.

Davis, who died in 1964 after a battle with cancer, believed in the future of women in flying. “I tell them that so far aviation is a man’s field. They can’t be just as good as a man to succeed— they’ve got to be better.”