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Article Summary: By the time Tillotson began flight instruction in 1928, pilots had to pass tests and be certified. She succeeded easily but then, less than three months after she took her first flying lesson, she crashed.

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Photographs / Images: Tillotson in spring 1928 with first class of pilots at Norfolk Flying School; Tillotson, 1928; Tillotson in her plane, spring 1928

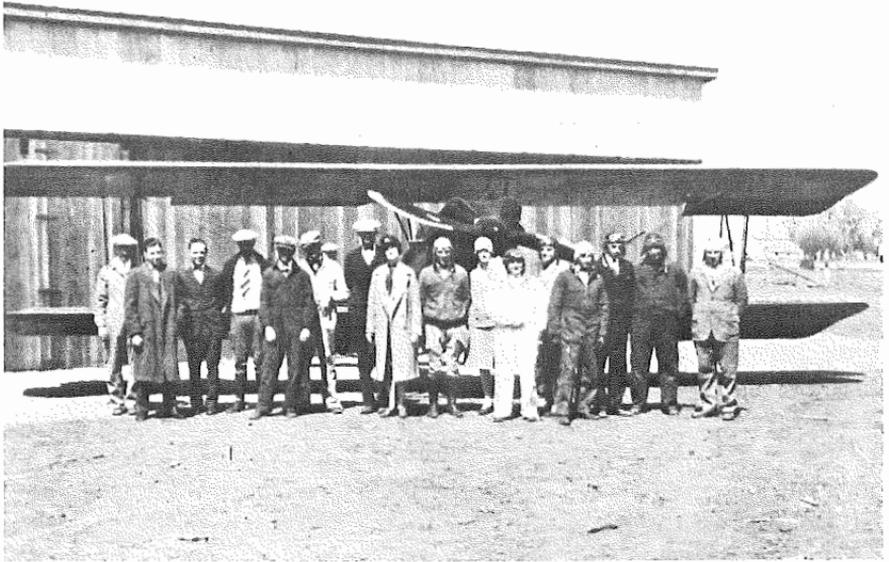
## Nebraska's First Aviatrix, Ethel Ives Tillotson: 1894-1928

BY DARLENE RITTER

In the Tilden, Nebraska, Odd Fellows Cemetery a tombstone records "Ethel Tillotson, wife of Charles E. Tillotson, Febr. 7, 1894-June 22, 1928." Above this information is etched the outline of a biplane and the epitaph, "Nebraska's First Aviatrix." This claim appears to be valid if "first" means a Nebraska-born and Nebraska-trained woman flier who soloed. The *Nebraska State Journal* in Lincoln used the words "Nebraska's First Aviatrix," to headline the story of the plane crash that took her life on June 22, 1928.<sup>1</sup> The *Norfolk News* said in its story of her death that she was "Nebraska's only woman pilot,"<sup>2</sup> though two young women in Omaha and one in Lincoln were in training school who had not soloed.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps there were other Nebraska women in flight schools or in training under veteran fliers.

Nebraskans read newspaper accounts of Mrs. Tillotson's flights and of her death in a plane crash, but few in 1928 fully apprehended her unique position in aviation history. Her name is all but forgotten today. Nebraskans are likely to think of two other women as "pioneers" in Nebraska skies: Ruth Law, an easterner, who flew exhibitions in the state a decade before Mrs. Tillotson soloed; and Evelyn Sharp of Ord, who flew planes for the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron during World War II. A Nebraska State Historical Society marker at Ord commemorates Miss Sharp's feats.<sup>4</sup>

By 1928 adventuresome pilots—most of them men—had been nosing their motor-powered flying machines into the Nebraska skies for almost two decades. It was the "Lindbergh Era"—one year following the Nebraska-trained aviator's epic flight to Paris that had electrified the world—when Mrs. Tillotson, caught up in the fervor of the times, took up flying



*Ethel Ives Tillotson (in long coat, 9th from right) in the spring of 1928 with first class of pilots and others at Norfolk Flying School, established by Andrew Risser (in jodhpurs, 8th from right). Others identified are Joe Lanctot, parachutist (in white, 6th from right) and Everett Hogan (6th from left, partially obscured). Courtesy of John J. Costello.*



*Ethel Tillotson, 1928. Courtesy of Mrs. Jean Riege.*

at the age of 34. To understand such then-unconventional behavior, one should recall the fascination flying had for people, especially the young, and Ethel was a *young* 34.

In 1910, not long after the aviation age began in America, an airplane was brought to Omaha by Glenn H. Curtiss, later a giant figure in aeronautics. He flew in what was billed as "the first air show in the West." One of Curtiss' pupils, Blanche Stuart Scott (1886-1970), supposedly the first female soloist in America (1910), was not with him in Omaha. There was, however, a woman in the air show, a Mrs. Mars, wife of sky-diver J. C. Mars, "the iron-nerved . . . parachute jumper." But Curtiss was bedeviled by a brash Omaha girl, Amy Gilmore, during preparations for his flight. She climbed uninvited into the cockpit. "Except for one woman, who made a flight [not in Omaha] and the wives of fellow aviators," the *Daily News* reported, Amy was the only woman to have entered the craft. The *News'* picture of Miss Gilmore in his plane, sent Curtiss into a rage. He was furious that she had "set foot in the sacred machine," the paper said.<sup>5</sup>

The first Nebraska-built plane apparently was flown by Omahans Charles and Gus Baysdorfer, also in 1910. At Ewing in Holt County, near Mrs. Tillotson's home, the Savidge brothers, seven of them, experimented in airplane construction, and on May 7, 1911, flew a plane they built. They contributed to the interest in aeronautics by flying aerial exhibitions and taking passengers for rides in their plane—in a new kind of show called barnstorming. Matt Savidge was killed in a plane crash in 1916, after which the surviving brothers gave up flying.<sup>6</sup> Women, too—pilots and passengers—were frequent casualties of air transportation. Harriet Quimby of Boston, in 1911 the first licensed woman flier, died the following year in a plane crash.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Mrs. Tillotson was well aware of the chancy nature of flying, but it held a fascination for her nonetheless.

Newspapers in 1928 were full of articles about "pioneer" women fliers. Even her hometown *Tilden Citizen*, a weekly not given to printing national news, published a succession of photo-features of women fliers whose exploits had gained them prominence: Amelia Earhart, Thea Rasche, Mildred Doran, Ruth Elder, and others. Women fliers were good copy.<sup>8</sup>

Aeronautics was curtailed during World War I by a federal ban on civilian flying. When it was lifted, flying schools opened and experimentation with aircraft resumed. The rich sportsman, the women's rights enthusiast, the tinkerer, all found flying a fascinating pastime. An added impetus was the possibility of buying for a few hundred dollars surplus planes left over from the war. Barnstorming became commonplace. There were aerial stunts, parachuting, skywriting, wing-walking, and rides for those who were sufficiently air-minded.<sup>9</sup> The fare was usually \$5.00 for a five to ten minute ride. The 1920s were the period of wild, uninhibited flying, when ex-war pilots, free from military discipline, gave a passenger "a lifetime of thrills." There were many fatalities, especially among the less-skilled pilots and their passengers. Soon a toughened group of gypsy fliers emerged, performing at air shows to which the public thronged.<sup>10</sup>

Ruth Law, a seasoned flier, first brought her aerial skills from the East to the Nebraska State Fair in Lincoln in 1916.<sup>11</sup> Miss Law, characterized by Amelia Earhart as a "picturesque figure,"<sup>12</sup> once observed while in Lincoln that she was "not worrying about old age overtaking me." When informed of the death of National Guard Captain Ralph E. McMillan, a barnstorming acquaintance, at a St. Francis, Kansas, fair, she said, "This [1917] has been a hoodoo year for aviators. So many of them have been killed or have had an accident." Then she went out in bad weather and flew exhibitions before State Fair crowds.<sup>13</sup> But in 1921 Ruth Law said she was giving up flying because it was becoming too businesslike. It didn't fit her "seat-of-the-pants" flying style. "Things are so proper now. . . . A pilot has so many rules and regulations to follow. . . . The good crazy old days of flying are gone."<sup>14</sup> She appears to have been a bit premature in her assessment, judging from the sometimes bewildering, sometimes zany events that occurred during the experimental flying of the 1920s and 1930s.

The 1920s was a pulsating decade for Nebraska aviation chiefly because of the emergence in Lincoln of the Pages—Ray and his wife Ethel—who became major figures in the field. Between 1920 and 1930 Lincoln was known throughout America as an aviation center. The Lincoln Page, the Lark and the Arrow Sport were built there.<sup>15</sup> Page manufactured the plane Ethel Tillotson flew, a Lincoln Page Trainer with

OX-5 engine.<sup>16</sup> Clustering around the Page operations—the Lincoln Standard Aircraft Company, the Aviation School, and Page's Aerial Pageant—were people destined to be famous in aeronautics:

Charles Lindbergh; John A. (Augie) Pedlar, pilot, lost over the Pacific on a flight to Hawaii with his co-pilot and girl passenger, Mildred Doran; Ira Biffle, Lindbergh's instructor; Encil Chambers, holder of the altitude record for parachute divers; Harlan (Bud) Gurney, 16-year-old-kid parachutist, who made a career as pilot for United Airlines and now lives in California; Lieutenant Charles Hardin, WWI Army Balloon Corps officer, and his wife Katherine, parachute manufacturers and parachute jumpers, and many others. Mrs. Hardin, billed as "the intrepid lady parachutist" in pageant advertising, was the only woman in the Page circus.<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Tillotson undoubtedly observed Katherine Hardin jump at the State Fair or at Page air shows nearer Tilden. Mrs. Hardin is thought never to have become a solo pilot,<sup>18</sup> though she may have been at the controls of planes when flying with others.

Government regulation of barnstorming was non-existent until the Air Commerce Act of 1926 placed licensing of pilots and aircraft under federal control.<sup>19</sup> The rash of crashes had spread the notion that aviation was a daredevil sport fit only for the young, bold—and foolish. Pilots without licenses often had flown "crates," some of them homemade, which had never been inspected, resulting in hundreds of crashes. Before the legislation went into effect, private air schools were graduating pilots with less than four hours of training who had risked the necks of thousands of passengers who wanted the thrill of "going up." The act created a Bureau of Civil Aeronautics and provided for federal inspection of the industry. Grounded until they gained greater proficiency were many barely competent pilots of the "bailing-wire brigade of barnstormers who had not yet killed themselves in machines that couldn't come near passing an airworthiness inspection."<sup>20</sup> This act and the onset of the Depression following the Stockmarket Crash of 1929 brought the era of gypsy pilots gradually to a close.<sup>21</sup>

By the time Ethel Tillotson found it convenient to begin lessons, flight instruction was required if fliers were to meet federal standards. Her dream of almost 10 years came true

when the Norfolk Flying School was established early in 1928 by Andrew A. Risser at Norfolk, 25 miles east of Tilden. Now she could enroll in a school near her home and fulfill her ambition to fly.<sup>22</sup> Risser, a young farmer living 6 miles southwest of Wisner, had gone to Wichita, a major aviation center, in September, 1926, to learn to fly. He returned to his father's farm flying a Beech OX5 Travel Air biplane in 1927. He took up passengers and instructed other air enthusiasts until March, 1928, when he moved to Norfolk to found his school.<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Tillotson was one of his first pupils.

Physical examinations were mandated to determine muscular control, eye strength, and general fitness. Color blindness, general vision, and visual ability to judge distance were required. If a person needed glasses, only a private license could be earned. After the candidate had learned fundamentals, he was tested by a Department of Commerce inspector in both technical knowledge and in actual flying. Questions asked were on plane mechanism, navigation, meteorology, air traffic rules, and Department of Commerce regulations. Flying tests consisted of landings, take-offs, and air maneuvers to show the pilot's proficiency. Thereafter periodic examinations were required.<sup>24</sup>

Ethel Tillotson first went aloft with instructor Risser on March 31, 1928, in his Lincoln Page Trainer, a two-place plane, the seat in front for the student, the one in rear for the pilot instructor. After nine hours in the air as a student pilot, she made her first solo flight on April 24. Then followed a two-month period in which she flew several times a week. The *Norfolk News* on May 11 in an article headlined "Mrs. Tillotson Is Praised for Skill" commented on her flight to the Omaha Municipal Airport:

Mechanics . . . were only mildly interested today when a canary-colored biplane circled the field, dipped her nose and settled as gracefully as a bird at the far end of the stretch. But when the ship had taxied to the hanger and it was disclosed that the pilot was a woman, they crowded around praising her skill.<sup>25</sup>

It was her first long flight and her first landing at a strange field. The trip had followed 38 solo flights in the Norfolk area. Her passengers on the flight to Omaha were her instructor and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Risser. Mrs. Tillotson was described as an especially apt pupil by Risser.<sup>26</sup>

A few days before she died, she was thought to have received a pilot's license. She had flown to Sioux City, Iowa, sometime previously to perform for examiners of the Bureau of Aeronautics.<sup>27</sup> At the Federal Aviation Administration in Oklahoma City a search was made in 1981 for information about Mrs. Tillotson's career, and a microfilm record was found of a card showing her name and the notation "folder destroyed." However, the administration's certification office said: "Our historical record indicates that she was certificated as a private pilot, but there is no indication of her certificate number or when she was certificated."<sup>28</sup> Considering the brief length of Mrs. Tillotson's flying career, the examiners in Sioux City must have granted her a license in early June, 1928. Nationwide she was in exclusive company, since by the end of 1928 only 12 women had been licensed as pilots in the United States and only seven women held the Department of Commerce transport license.<sup>29</sup>

At that time there were four types of flying licenses: (1) private, which required 10 hours of solo time; (2) industrial, 50 solo hours; (3) limited commercial, 50 solo hours; (4) transport, 200 solo hours. The transport license permitted its holder to fly passengers for hire or to give instruction.<sup>30</sup>

Mrs. Tillotson hoped to make aviation her life's vocation. Her plans were to pilot her own plane and eventually take up passengers. She had built up more than 50 solo hours in the air by June, but her dream of owning a plane and extending her flying experience to the level necessary to obtain a prestigious transport license were never realized.<sup>31</sup> It was six weeks after her flight into Omaha and less than three months after she took her first lesson when she crashed. The *News* of June 22 reported:

Death rode the wings of an airplane flown by Mrs. C. E. Tillotson, 34, Battle Creek, as she was making a practice flight about 8 o'clock last evening. Nebraska's only licensed woman pilot . . . [was] killed instantly when apparently she lost control at an altitude of about 400 feet. . . . The plane plunged to earth and landed in a ditch at the south edge of the Norfolk airport landing field.<sup>32</sup>

Risser, her instructor, explained that Mrs. Tillotson, who "was doing figure eights . . . , evidently banked too sharply and slipped off. This caused the machine to go into a spiral and not a nose dive. After coming out of the spiral, she must

have pulled the wrong way, thus causing the plane to turn over and crash to the ground.”<sup>33</sup>

As news of the tragedy raced through the community, hundreds of curious persons drove to the airport to see the demolished plane. “Souvenir hunters started their work shortly, ripping pieces of canvas from the plane. Even pieces of apparatus on the instrument board were taken by vandals,” the *Tilden Citizen* reported. Tilden, the small town where she was raised, and Battle Creek, where she lived, had been quietly proud of their woman flier. There was a “feeling of great sorrow and regret over the death of this intrepid woman aviatrix,” the *Citizen* said. “She has grown to womanhood in this community where she was loved and respected for her fine womanly qualities.”<sup>34</sup>

Her funeral, held in the Tillotson home in Battle Creek, was conducted by her uncle, the Reverend Joseph Cossairt, of Liberty, Missouri. Hundreds of persons were unable to gain admittance to her home during the services. A long cortege of autos followed the body to the Tilden cemetery for the burial. Survivors were her husband, father, a brother, two sisters, and nieces and nephews.<sup>35</sup>

Mrs. Tillotson’s family felt the loss so deeply that her nephew, Darrell Horrocks of Columbus, said over 50 years later: “We never talked about it. She was our idol.” Though finding it difficult to talk of her death, he did reminisce about some of her experiences:

He remembers her as “not being afraid of anything.” Her father, Frank J. Ives, and her husband were automobile dealers, and Horrocks remembers that she preferred to drive the big, fast models. When the Ford Model A replaced the Model T in 1928, she drove with the salesman, her brother-in-law, to her sister’s place to demonstrate the car. She took her brother-in-law and two nephews for a ride over hilly roads at 70 miles per hour. Her brother-in-law acknowledged the car’s speed but reminded her that advertisements said the Model A would travel easily over rough fields. He opened a gate and she drove the Ford over corn stubble at high speed to prove the advertisement was true. She once accepted a challenge to race from the owner of a Studebaker car and beat him in her Model A.<sup>36</sup> As a teenager Mrs. Tillotson drove a big steam engine

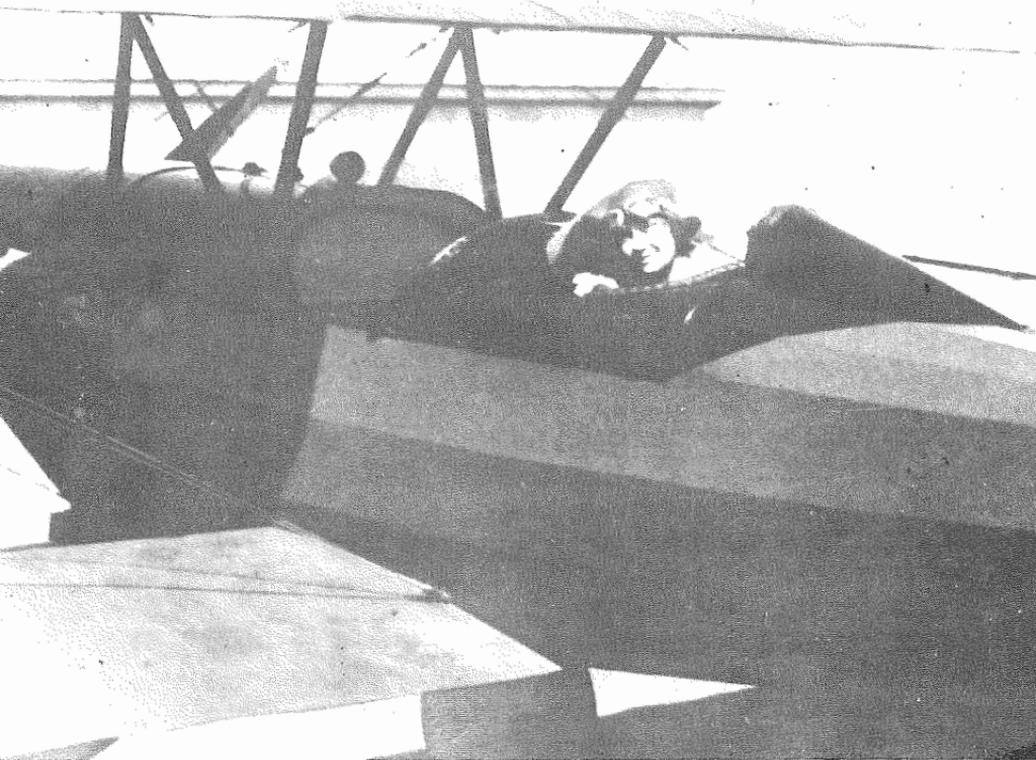
from one farm to another helping her father do custom grain threshing.<sup>37</sup>

Ethel Tillotson first helped her father sell cars in Tilden. When she and her husband went into the automobile business together, he encouraged her to demonstrate automobiles. She became as proficient a salesman as her father or her husband. In the 1920s, when it was unusual for women to drive alone for long distances, she transported cars from Omaha to the dealership in Tilden. One of the reasons she had made her flight to Omaha was to accept delivery of a new car and drive it to Battle Creek. This time she had Mrs. Risser as a passenger on the return auto trip, and Risser flew the plane back to Norfolk.<sup>38</sup>

The Tillotsons had no children, but they were ever solicitous of their nieces and nephews, who remember them fondly. A niece, Mrs. Jean Riege of O'Neill, believes that if her aunt had had children she would not have been so brash. "She was a daredevil. Things challenged her," Mrs. Riege said. The immediate family, especially her sister Bird, with whom she was very close, did not encourage Ethel in her aspirations to become a flier. Yet, there was an ambivalence in the attitudes of her immediate relatives. They did not condemn her; neither did they praise her. They were always apprehensive about "what could happen," Mrs. Reige said, but there obviously was an underlying current of pride at her grit. This was especially true of her husband, who recognized his "wife's skill . . . but was not a flying enthusiast." No one in the family ever flew with her, nor is it believed that they went to the Norfolk Airfield to watch her fly.<sup>39</sup>

Horrocks said that some days preceding the crash, Mrs. Tillotson said that at high altitude her plane had fallen about 1,000 feet before she with difficulty was able to bring it under control and land. When she appeared at the airfield the evening of the crash, she was thought to have wanted Risser to accompany her. He was unable to do so, having agreed to instruct another student, William Luebke of Pierce. Aloft at the time they saw Mrs. Tillotson's plane go down, they immediately landed nearby and were among the first at the crash site. She had died instantly.<sup>40</sup>

Horrocks believed she may have had a premonition of death the day of the crash because of having lost control of her plane



*Ethel Ives Tillotson, spring, 1928.*

for an interval the last time she flew. Her movements the day of the accident were evidence of it. She first went to the home of her sister, Bird Yeoman, and chatted for several minutes. She also drove to the home of her father in Tilden and talked to him at length. Mrs. Tillotson's hired girl later told the bereaved family that Mrs. Tillotson, while preparing to go to Norfolk, had taken so long to emerge from her dressing room that the maid had gone to summon her. The hired girl recalled that Mrs. Tillotson after examining herself in a full-length mirror went outside and spent some minutes walking around the yard before she got into her car. She wore her usual khaki flying outfit—jodhpurs, jacket, laced boots, and helmet with goggles. She had arranged to arrive in Norfolk, 10 miles from Battle Creek, in the early evening, the time of day most flying students practiced because the air currents were then smoother.<sup>41</sup>

Delivery on the new plane she had ordered was scheduled to arrive that day in Norfolk, and she had pinned a \$1,000 check, a down-payment on the plane, inside her dress. The aircraft, a Page PT, had not arrived as expected at the airport.<sup>42</sup> It is not known whether she expected to go aloft in it that day had it

come. Mrs. Riege, only 9 years old at the time, remembers that the new plane arrived Saturday and was flown by a fellow pilot on Sunday, the day of her funeral.

Seven years after Ethel Tillotson died, Nebraska's most celebrated woman flier, Evelyn Sharp of Ord, soloed at 16 years of age. Two years later she was among the youngest women ever to complete requirements for a commercial license. Planes, becoming more reliable year by year, were destined to play a significant role in destroying the Axis in World War II. By then women were no longer mere novelties in aviation. At 20 Miss Sharp became one of the instructors at a Spearfish, South Dakota, flying school, where over 350 men learned to fly. In World War II she joined the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, as did many women fliers, to fly planes from factories to Army airfields and to perform other state-side services. Miss Sharp was killed in Pennsylvania in 1944 when the twin-fuselage P-38 fighter she was piloting went down. Had Ethel Tillotson lived until the 1940s, she quite likely would have been engaged in some aeronautical pursuit during WW II.<sup>43</sup>

## NOTES

1. *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), June 23, 1928.
2. *Norfolk* (Nebraska) *Daily News*, June 23, 1928.
3. *Ibid.*, May 11, 1928.
4. "Evelyn Sharp," Out-of-Old-Nebraska, bound research columns furnished by Nebraska State Historical Society to Nebraska Press Association, July 20, 1973.
5. *Omaha Daily News*, July 24, 1910.
6. "Aviation Pioneers in Nebraska" (Out-of-Old-Nebraska newspaper columns written by the Nebraska State Historical Society and distributed to newspapers by the Nebraska Press Association), June 5, 1981.
7. Don Dwiggin, *The Barnstormers* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1968), 5-6.
8. *Tilden* (Nebraska) *Citizen*, March 20, June 28, July 28, August 11, 1928, and other issues.
9. Dwiggin, 21.
10. *Ibid.*, 22; Charles A. Lindbergh, *We* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1927), 28.
11. *Nebraska State Journal*, September 3, 1916.
12. Amelia Earhart, *The Fun of It* (New York: Brewer, Warren and Putnam, 1932), 185.
13. *Lincoln State Journal*, September 5, 1917.
14. Dwiggin, 11-12.
15. Aeronautics clipping file, Nebraska State Historical Society; see Nancy Baynes,

"The Page Aerial Pageant," unpublished MS accepted for publication by *Nebraska History* (1981), 1ff.

16. Questionnaire completed for Nebraska State Historical Society by John J. Costello, commercial pilot and fixed base operator of Norfolk, Nebraska, March, 1981. At the time Mrs. Tillotson was a pupil of the school, Risser flew planes built by Ray Page at Lincoln—The Lincoln Page, Lincoln Standard, and Lincoln PT, all biplanes. He also had at his school the Beech Travel Air and Curtiss Robin monoplane.

17. Aeronautics clipping file, Nebraska State Historical Society; Baynes, "The Page Aerial Pageant," 3.

18. Letter, Harlan A. (Bud) Gurney to Nebraska State Historical Society, February 20, 1981.

19. Dwiggins, 45.

20. M. W. Roysse, "An Air Law for America," *The Nation*, 22 (December 1926), 659.

21. Dwiggins, 213.

22. Costello questionnaire. Travel Air plane was a two-seat biplane equipped with dual controls for instruction purposes.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Paul L. Briand Jr., *Daughter of the Sky: The Story of Amelia Earhart* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1960), 34-37.

25. *Norfolk* (Nebraska) *Press*, April 26, 1928; *Norfolk News*, May 11, 1928.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, June 23, 1928.

28. Letter, Earl F. Mahoney, chief, Airmen Certification Branch, Federal Aviation Administration, September 2, 1981.

29. Earhart, 154, 157.

30. *Ibid.*, 30.

31. *Tilden Citizen*, June 28, 1928.

32. *Norfolk News*, June 23, 1928.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Tilden Citizen*, June 28, 1928.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Interview, Darlene Ritter with Darrell Horrocks (nephew of Ethel Ives Tillotson), Columbus, Nebraska, September 27, 1979.

37. Costello questionnaire.

38. Horrocks interview.

39. Interview, Darlene Ritter with Mrs. Jean Riege (niece of Ethel Ives Tillotson), O'Neill, Nebraska, October, 1979; Costello questionnaire.

40. Horrocks interview; *Tilden Citizen*, June 28, 1928; letter, LaVern A. Buckendahl, Pierce County Historical Society, to Nebraska State Historical Society, January 16, 1981.

41. Horrocks interview; Costello questionnaire.

42. *Tilden Citizen*, June 28, 1928.

43. See Nebraska State Historical Society aeronautical clipping file for flying careers of these Nebraska fliers of the 1930s and during WW II: Nellie Wilhite, Dorothy Barden, and Louise Tinsley Miller.