

1996

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Hampton Dunn

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Recommended Citation

Dunn, Hampton (1996) "Ruth Elder: All-American Girl of the Jazz Age," *Sunland Tribune*: Vol. 22 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol22/iss1/11>

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RUTH ELDER: ALL-AMERICAN GIRL OF THE JAZZ AGE

By Hampton Dunn



Ruth Elder

— *Lakeland Ledger*

The year Nineteen Twenty-Seven has been dubbed The year the World Went MAD. In fact, free-lance writer and editor Allen Churchill wrote a book with that title about the exciting times that climaxed the decade of the Roaring Twenties.¹

The blurb on the dust jacket flap explained:

"1927 — peak of the Age of Wonderful Nonsense, ear of Prohibition and Peepholes, jazz babies and ukuleles, Clara Bow and Ramon Navarro, tabloids and portable victrolas . . ." Want more? Try the Year of the Big Shrick.² Or, would you believe, the

Whoopie Era, the Lawless Decade, the Age of Hoopla, and on and on?³

Think not that Florida escaped being "touched" by this hurricane of madness. Actually, the multimillion-dollar boom in local swampland had burst unhappily the year before — but the speculators, the opportunists, and the fat cats just didn't realize it. In Miami, the temperature climbed from 48 degrees to a pleasantly warm 71 at noon.

And America — and the world — was in a daredevilish, record-setting mode. Indeed, that was the year Charles "Lucky Lindy" Lindbergh courageously pioneered and flew — alone — from New York across the Atlantic Ocean and landed in Paris.⁴

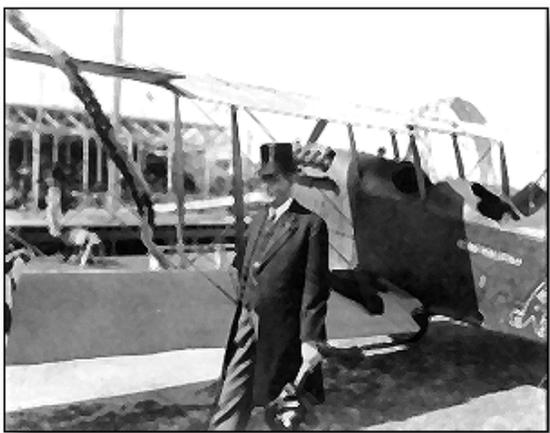
And then the world went MAD, trying to set new records in the air; attempting to be "first" in this or that. Raymond Orteig, a St. Louis businessman, had started the non-stop trans Atlantic steeplechase, and setting the entire aeronautical world in a tizzy back in 1919, when he posted a \$25,000 — a large sum in those days (and not bad even today) prize for the first non-stop flight from New York to Paris. In Jacksonville, Fla., a hotel operator sweetened the pot by adding another \$1,000 to the prize pot.

In obscure little Lakeland, Fla., a true pioneer in the business of flying, a man named George Haldeman, caught the fever and itched to become that first flier to cross the ocean in a "flying machine." On a visit to Daytona Beach, Fla., he had seen the first Pitcairn airplane equipped with the new Wright J-5 engine. Ervie Ballough, who was

piloting the aircraft, made the prophetic statement, in Haldeman's presence, that the first man who could have an airplane built around that engine and get off the ground with 400 gallons of gasoline would be able to make a non-stop flight from New York to Paris and collect Orteig's prize. That prediction was made several years prior to 1927.⁵ Even, then, George Haldeman was making plans to reach for the plum. Ballough's estimate of what it would take to fly the Atlantic was made months before Lindbergh accomplished his world famous feat on May 20-21, 1927, in a Ryan monoplane equipped with ... you guessed it: a Wright J-5 engine and carrying between 300 and 400 gallons of fuel! "Lucky Lindy" did this before George had been able to complete his own plans, to say nothing of raising funds for the trip. So, Haldeman put his dream on the back burner.

Enter: A pretty young lass named Ruth Elder, a one-time dental assistant and beauty contest winner.⁶

Ruth Elder also was a student pilot of Haldeman. One day she came to her instructor with a novel idea: She wanted to



Tampa Mayor Charles H. Brown poses beside George Haldeman's plane at Drew Field.

— Courtesy Hampton Dunn Collection

be the first woman to fly the Atlantic! Her name began appearing in headlines all over the world. Ruth became and overnight, international celebrity. The headline writers had a field day. She was called the "Flapper Flier,"⁷ a "Flamboyant beauty,"⁸ "The All-American Girl,"⁹ "Miss America of the Air,"¹⁰ also "Miss America of Aviation."¹¹ Author Allen Churchill even dubbed her "a nifty Jane."¹²

And the staid, ever-so-proper *New York Times* got familiar enough with the charming Florida lady that it dared to break its own rules — and unprecedentedly referred to the plucky Lakeland miss simply as "Ruth" in its stories!¹³

The Stinson monoplane she made famous with flight was named *American Girl*.

Ruth Elder "migrated" to Lakeland from Anniston, Ala. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. C. Elder, later followed. Hers was a large family. She had two sisters and five brothers.

Allen Churchill recorded that the prim *New York Times* was "smitten" by the good-looking gal from Alabam'.¹⁴ The author wrote: The newspaper "reported in warm detail that she was smaller than her photographs made her seem and that she spoke with a soft Alabama drawl."

Churchill added this description of Ruth: "With her wide smile, she looked exactly like the Pepsodent ads in contemporary magazines".¹⁵

Haldeman himself became as enthusiastic about the daring adventure as his beautiful understudy was. Before his death in 1982, this author interviewed him while researching the book *Yesterday's Lakeland*.¹⁶ There was one glitch: Ruth was married. Her husband, Lyle Womack, had departed for

Panama on business. He thought he had persuaded his glamorous wife not to attempt the flight.¹⁷

When Ruth first approached George with her idea, he told her to forget the thought of going alone.

"I shook my head and shot back at her, 'No, no, Ruth, you can't do that — you have only 100 or 150 hours in the air, and I will not let you go alone.'" Whereupon, she begged for him to go as pilot and she as co-pilot.

"Ruth was applying for a divorce at the time," George continued. "I insisted I would not fly her across the ocean until she got her divorce. She got it, and we moved fast to begin the flight."¹⁸

Others also had objected. "Even if she succeeds, what will she have accomplished for the common good?" asked an eminent woman sociologist of the day.¹⁹ Other women joined in the chorus and newspapers like the *New York World* editorially suggested that the 23-year-old flapper be officially restrained. There were reports that Ruth's mother back in Alabama opposed the risky adventure. But on the day the fliers took off from New York for Paris, the United Press in a dispatch printed in *The Anniston [Ala.] Star* in her hometown quoted Ruth as saying, "her mother had given her approval to the flight." The UP news story stated that Ruth had with her a Bible sent by her mother.

In her new role as America's heartthrob, the aviation-struck Miss Elder found herself as the style-setter for the young ladies of the nation. The possessor of one of the first boyish bobs in recorded history, she decided to let her hair grow back into a full bob.²⁰ While this happened, she wound a scarf around her head gypsy fashion, and soon



This photograph, autographed by Ruth Elder herself, shows Ruth and George descending from the plane from an unidentified location.

— Courtesy Hampton Dunn Collection

girls all across the country were doing the same. And, Churchill noted, the Lakeland lady also wore plus fours and golf socks "in the Clarence Chamberlin manner."²¹ Altogether, observers say, she added up to the image of an attractive, intrepid aviatrix — which she surely was.

The Elder-Haldeman odyssey started like this, in the words of George: "We left from old Drew Field in Tampa (the Lakeland airport was not finished at the time). Congressman Herbert J. Drane came over to Tampa to tell us good-bye and to wish us luck."²²

They stopped in Wheeling, W. Va., to greet some business men who were backing the flight. Then it was on to New York to await ideal weather. It came on October 11, 1927. The plane was at Roosevelt Field perched on a ramp to help the craft, heavily laden with gasoline, get off the ground.

Well-wishers put a "care" package, a hamper of food aboard. Included were a vacuum bottle of hot bouillon, three turkey sandwiches, two bottles of coffee, one of

tea, a gallon of water, and some sweet chocolates.²³ Ruth's comment: "At first we were going to take a whole lot of stuff to eat. But we'll be in Paris soon, and they have plenty of food there."

Besides, Ruth had had a hearty breakfast: a slice of honeydew melon, two soft boiled eggs and toast, and two cups of coffee.²⁴

The American Girl took off at 5:04 p.m., and back in Anniston, Ala., the afternoon *Star* put out an "EXTRA" to announce the news to the folks in Ruth's hometown, with a "streamer" in box car letters shouting: RUTH ELDER OFF TO PARIS. Thus The American Girl added another roar to "the Roaring Twenties."

The wire story mentioned that Miss Elder's "costume" for the flight consisted of gray knickers, a plaid sweater and a white, starched sport shirtwaist under her flying suit.²⁵ Under the flying helmet she wore, the United Press reported, the scarlet bandanna "which has become as much a part of her as Helen Will's eye shade." The UP (now United Press International) also reported that "in the pocket of her flying suit, (Ruth) admitted, she was carrying a complete vanity case, with lipstick, rouge, and all."

The Lakeland lady was quoted as saying: "I want to get out of the plane at Le Bourget as cool and neat as I did at the start. Surely, I'll powder my nose whenever I feel like it — flying or not flying."²⁶

Spoken like the good-looking beauty queen that she was.

The flight would follow the "Lindbergh Trail" from New York, along the New England and Maine coast, over Old Orchard, Maine, over Nova Scotia and

Newfoundland, and across the Atlantic to Ireland, England, and France.

The American Girl flew far south of the Great Circle Route, which one historian noted was "cold and hazardous in October."²⁷ But the southerly course would be near shipping lanes — which proved to be fortunate as we shall see.

The historian added: "American Girl ran into heavy squalls several hundred miles after takeoff and flew straight into the teeth of them for eight terrifying hours. At one point the plane heaved so dangerously that the comely Ruth Elder crept out on the tail to balance it. Other times she relieved Haldeman at the controls. At one danger point, Haldman was forced to dump gasoline to help the plane in its fight against the storm. Next the oil pressure began to fail. 'Look for a ship,' Haldeman finally ordered. Five hours later Ruth spied the Dutch tanker *Barendrecht*."²⁸

Miss Elder dropped a note to the ship, weighted by a spark plug,²⁹ asking how far to land, and which way? On deck, in large letters, the captain answered that the nearest land was Terceira, Azores, 360 miles away, or more than 500 miles from the coast of Portugal.³⁰ Haldeman decided to ditch the plane, and brought it down into the choppy ocean. He and Ruth climbed out on the wing from which a lifeboat rescued them. For a moment the American Girl bobbed in the water, then gasoline ran over the steaming engine and caught fire. An explosion followed and the plane went down. In Paris a week later, Ruth sadly said, "It was like watching an old friend drown."³¹

Back home, the *Lakeland Evening Telegram* spread the good news in a streamer in box car letters: FLIERS RESCUED BY SHIP.³² Next morning, the *Tampa Morning Tribune*

headlined RUTH ELDER SAFE ON SHIP In Lakeland, the populace was "electrified" by the happy word and Mayor William S. Rodgers issued a call "for all" citizens to celebrate in Munn park. Ex-husband Lyle Womack turned up in the Panama Canal Zone, calling Ruth "the bravest girl in the world."³³ *The New York Times* credited the plane flown by the two Lakeland celebrities with "the longest flight over water ever made" until then, 2,623 miles.³⁴

The captain of the tanker was captivated by the real American girl, Ruth Elder, and told this story about her: "When she stepped on the deck of the ship, worn and wet and with her hair plastered to her head she very politely thanked me and then reached into a bag for a mirror and lipstick to repair some of the damage that had been done to her makeup."³⁵ The *Barendrecht* changed its course to drop off the aviator passengers in the Azores.³⁶

There Ruth met an established Viennese actress who had flown over from Lisbon in a German Junkers flying boat. After resting a few days in the Azores, the Florida fliers then boarded a ship for Lisbon where they were met by the American Minister.³⁷ They were escorted by Portuguese officials to the Government Palace where President Carmona congratulated them on their thrilling rescue. There were flown to Madrid by a military plane where they were greeted by the American Ambassador.³⁸ But their odyssey was not yet over. They made an overnight train trip to Bantiz and a commercial flight to Le Bourget Field in Paris, arriving there on October 28.³⁹ Hello, Patee! (If Ruth and George had arrived at le Bourget when they were originally due, they would have been greeted by a crowd of 25,000 persons who were anxiously awaiting the pair.)⁴⁰ In Paris, the

Lakelanders were wined and dined and some said their reception was probably greater than if they had successfully completed the trip.⁴¹ At any rate, France's top officials honored the team at a reception at the swank Hotel de Ville.⁴²

Although their flight was dubbed "a glorious failure,"⁴³ Elder and Haldeman were given hero status everywhere they went. On November 5th, they left Cherbourg aboard the British liner, *Aquatania*, arriving in New York on November 11. On board, pretty Ruth whiled away the hours of the journey playing shuffleboard and walking the dogs her new-found friend in France had given her. This writer was so dazzled by Ruth's fur coat, he failed to get the names of the pets.

Rested up, Ruth and George were ready for New York and home soil. And the Big Apple was ready for them. They were met by Mayor Jimmy Walker's reception committee and escorted to City Hall where the dapper His Honor himself added his greeting. And then, one of those famous New York noontime ticker parades up Broadway. However, it was reported⁴⁴ the City of New York spent only \$333.90 on greeting Ruth and her mentor, as compared with more than \$1,000 for Charles A. Levine, \$12,000 for the President of the Irish Free State, \$26,000 for Admiral Byrd, and \$71,000 for Lindbergh.

Good-bye, New York, Hello, Washington! Haldeman and Elder got back to the States to be invited by President Calvin Coolidge — "Silent Cal," he was called — to a luncheon on November 13, 1927, at the White House, joining other airmen who had attempted to fly the Atlantic, including Charles A. Lindbergh, Clarence Chamberlin, Richard E. Byrd.⁴⁵ Social note: Ruth was the only female at the luncheon — and she wore that warm and fuzzy coat! She posed for a

picture, front row, center, standing between tall, lanky "Lucky Lindy" and the President.

After the noisy homecoming, beautiful Ruth signed up for a 25-week tour at the rate of \$5,000 a week.⁴⁶ She was in vaudeville for six months, reputedly receiving more than \$100,000 for personal appearances. She starred in two silent movies with Richard Dix and Hoot Gibson.⁴⁷ Her bank account stood at \$250,000.

But easy come, easy go. Ruth blew her nest egg. "The money slipped through my fingers, and soon there was nothing," Miss Elder said in an interview years later.⁴⁸

Ruth continued to "dabble" in aviation, even flew in the first National Women's Air Derby in 1929 and came in fourth.⁴⁹

For years, Ruth lived in Honolulu, then moved to San Francisco where she died in 1977. Shortly before Ruth's death, this writer happened to be in San Francisco. He called up the former Floridian and made an appointment for an interview. She called my hotel and left a message, saying she didn't feel well and begged off the interview date.

In an obituary on Ruth, the Associated Press summed up her life after the flight: "In the half century after the flight ... Miss Elder made movies, met a President, hobnobbed with royalty, married six times, made a lot of money — and spent it all."

Her husbands included New York socialite Walter Camp, Jr. At one time, there were rumors that Ruth Elder and Howard Hughes had a "relationship" going.⁵⁰

She was 74 when she died on October 9, 1977, almost 50 years to the 50th anniversary of her aborted flight. Her husband of 21 years, Ralph King, 79, told

reporters his flamboyant wife had been suffering from emphysema for several years.⁵¹ She was bedridden for the last two weeks after complications from a broken hip. She was cremated and her ashes were scattered over San Francisco Bay.

"She was a beautiful person, a real woman," said King.

She had divorced her six husbands, including King, whom she remarried. King also was wed six times. When Ruth divorced King in 1953, she claimed he had called her a "gray-haired old bag."⁵²

Haldeman continued in aviation to his dying day. Eighty-four when he died in Lakeland in 1982, Haldeman was at the time a consultant on the controversial B-1 bomber. This writer had the honor of being an honorary pallbearer at his funeral.

¹ Allen Churchill, *The Year the World Went MAD* (New York, 1960).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Charles A. Lindbergh, *We* (New York, 1927), 224.

⁵ William C. Lazarus, *Wings in the Sun* (Orlando, FL, 1951), 93.

⁶ Churchill, 246.

⁷ *Philadelphia Record*, undated.

⁸ *Lakeland (FL) Ledger* Oct. 10, 1977, 1.

⁹ Churchill, 247.

¹⁰ *The Tampa Tribune*, Oct. 11, 1977 (AP dispatch).

¹¹ Martha E Sawyer, *The Lakeland Ledger*, June 10, 1987, 7C.

¹² Churchill, 247.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Hampton Dunn, *Lakeland: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk/Virginia Beach, VA, 1990), 41.

¹⁷ Interview, Hampton Dunn and George Haldeman, Tampa, 1976.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Churchill, 248.

²⁰ Ibid., 247.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hampton Dunn, *Yesterday's Lakeland* (Tampa, 1976), 48.

²³ Paul W. White, *The Anniston (AL) Star*, Oct. 11, 1927.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Churchill, 248.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Warren J. Brown, *Florida's Aviation History: The First One Hundred Years* (Largo, FL, 1980), 126.

³⁰ Churchill, 248.

³¹ Ibid.

³² *Lakeland Evening Telegram*, Oct. 13, 1927, 1.

³³ Leland Hawes, *The Tampa Tribune*, April 18, 1993.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Brown, 128.

³⁶ Hawes, *The Tampa Tribune*, April 18, 1993.

³⁷ Brown, 130.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 126.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Dunn, *Yesterday's Lakeland*, 132.

⁴³ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁴ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday* (New York and London, 1931), 223.

⁴⁵ Brown, 131.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Miami Herald*, Oct. 11, 1977.

⁴⁹ Brown, 131.

⁵⁰ Sawyer, *Lakeland (FL) Ledger*, June 10, 1987, 7C.

⁵¹ Associated Press dispatch from San Francisco, *The Tampa Tribune*, Oct. 11, 1977.

⁵² Sawyer, *Lakeland (FL) Ledger*, March 1, 1987.