Welcome to the Moorhead Municipal Airport – Florence Klingensmith Field

FLORENCE "Tree Tops" KLINGENSMITH

Florence "Tree Tops" Klingensmith was a pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit with a 'can-do' attitude that never wavered. She demonstrated amazing courage in aviation's early days, when women were often discouraged from entering the new and challenging field. She loved to fly and helped open the skies to other women interested in flying.

Meet Florence

Florence Gunderson was born in rural Moorhead on September 3, 1904. Schoolmates remembered her as an athletic, nice girl, who was fearless and ready to try anything on a dare. She had a love of motorcycles and speed. Florence left school at 17 and worked as a delivery driver for a laundry service where she met Charles Klingensmith. They married in 1925 but separated in 1928.

Florence's passion and love for flying were ignited by Charles Lindbergh's 1927 transatlantic solo flight and when she saw his motorcade go through Fargo that August. At age 23, she decided to become a pilot. She took airplane mechanic's training at a Fargo trade school, "A lone girl among four hundred boys" she later wrote. Florence worked as a mechanic and parachute jumper for a Fargo barnstorming aeronautical entertainment pilot in exchange for flying lessons.

Florence just before her first plane ride, about 1925. She wasn't thrilled at first, "my looks certainly betray my feelings" she later wrote on the back of this photo, "but now I'm crazy to go for a flight."

BACKGROUND PHOTO: Florence wins four events at the 1931 National Air Races in Cleveland. She used her winnings to buy this Fo-ving Waco.

Gaining Her Wings

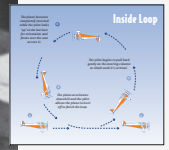
During winter 1928, Florence went door to door asking local Fargo businesses to help her purchase a plane that she would use to advertise their businesses at fairs, flying meets, and air races. She successfully raised $3,000 (about $50,000 today) and purchased her first plane, a Monocoupe.

Florence continued to barnstorm at county fairs, carried passengers, worked as operations manager at Fargo's Hector Field, and became a founding member of the women's flying organization, The Ninety-Nines.

In June 1929, she became the first licensed female pilot in North Dakota.

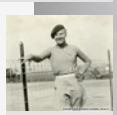
In the United States, in 1928, there were 29 million women eligible to vote. Fewer than a dozen had a pilot's license on file at the U.S. Department of Commerce, which was the regulating agency at the time. Determined to join their ranks, Florence took her first solo flight in June 1928.

Florence went door to door persuading Fargo businessmen to provide money for a plane with which she would promote Fargo. Her persistence paid off. She bought this Model 32 Monocoupe which she named "Miss Fargo."



On June 22, 1931, at World-Chamberlain Field in Minneapolis, with over 50,000 spectators watching, Florence set the new world record by completing 1,078 inside loops in an intense 4.5-hour flight and still holds the women's record today.

Florence later moved to Minneapolis where she worked as a division traffic manager for American Eagle Airlines. She taught men and women to fly and gave radio addresses on women in aviation.



Florence at Weld-Chamberlain Field in Minneapolis, about 1931. Florence worked for American Eagle Airlines, taught men and women to fly and gave radio addresses on women in aviation.

Ready to Race

But Florence wasn't satisfied just performing stunts and cruising the skies – she wanted to compete in the air race, one of the most popular sports in America in the 1920s and '30s. Florence quickly proved that she had the skill to race anyone, male or female. Florence won four events at the 1931 National Air Races in Cleveland. At the 1932 Nationals, she won the prestigious Amelia Earhart Trophy and successfully competed against male pilots. Her hard work, determination, and flying ability earned her the sometimes grudging respect of male pilots.

One year later in 1933, she was the first and only woman to enter the prestigious $10,000 Frank Phillips Trophy International Air Race in Chicago.

That day, Florence would fly a plane that had killed many men. The plane, called a Gee Bee Sportster, was shaped like a bullet, souped up with a 670 horsepower engine, and was the fastest plane of its time. Its inherent flaws would lead directly to Florence's death, too. Florence was flying a beautiful race, tied for third in a field of six male pilots. On the eighth lap, the fabric tore from the right wing. Florence pulled out of the race and headed away from the crowded grandstand. The overpowered aircraft flipped and dove to the ground. Florence died instantly. She had just turned 29.

Florence convinced a Michigan owner to loan her this bright red and white Gee Bee Y Senior Sportster to fly in the Phillips Trophy Race in 1933. The plane came with a 250 horse power engine. This one was souped up with an aftermarket 600 horse engine.

Amelia Earhart congratulates Florence on winning the Amelia Earhart Trophy at the 1932 National Air Races in Cleveland.

In moments like these in the 1930s, male aviators typically received grand memorials, moments of silence, and national tributes. Florence received nothing of the like. Instead, male aviation officials in Chicago shipped her body home to Moorhead on a train, naked and wrapped in newspapers. Despite all the obvious evidence, they claimed it was Florence's fault that she had crashed. They blamed her because she was a woman – a woman who had dared to fly.

Florence's death made headlines across the country. Unfortunately, [illegible]

Caption for the air crash photo – or maybe it is part of the news article?

Poster for the 1933 International Air Races in Chicago. The International Air Races were end-of-bout of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. Over 50,000 spectators filled the grandstand.

To honor Florence Klingensmith and recognize her accomplishments and aviation achievements, the Moorhead airport was renamed Moorhead Municipal Airport – Florence Klingensmith Field in 2022. Florence is buried in Oakport Township, near her childhood home. Her story still inspires young women in aviation as well as many others to pursue and live out their dreams.

"Florence Klingensmith grew up on this prairie and, in time, proved herself to be one of fastest, toughest, and bravest women to fly a plane. In the golden age of aviation in the early 1930s, she even dared to race against the men. Now she flies again. Her spirit lives in the skies over Moorhead."

- Keith O'Brien, New York Times bestselling author of Fly Girls

A special thank you to Keith O'Brien for bringing Florence's story back to life and back to her community. His book Fly Girls shares the untold story of five women who fought to compete again men in the high-stakes air races of the 1920s and 1930s – and won.