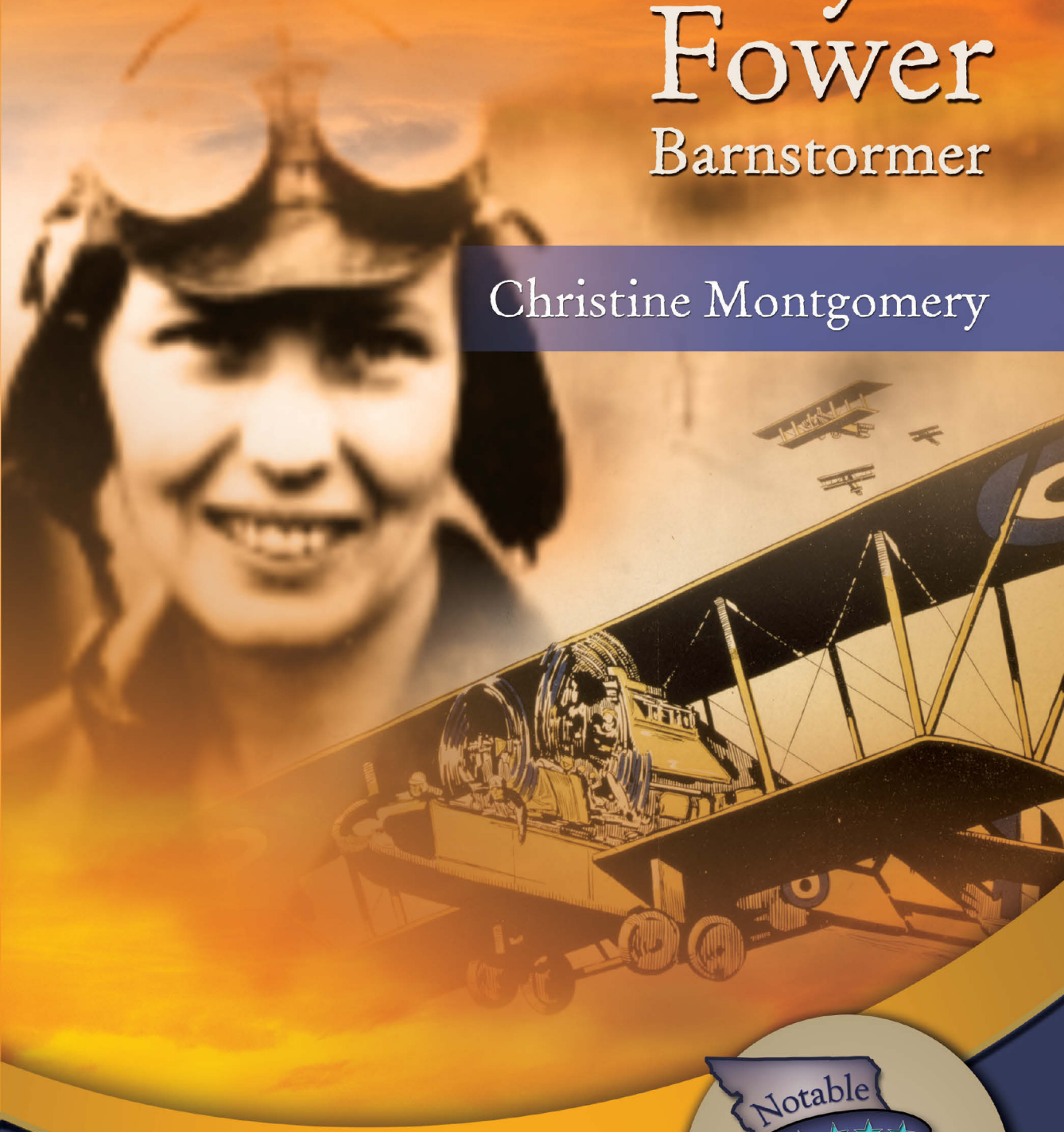


Marie Meyer Fower Barnstormer

Christine Montgomery



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Cover art: Marie Meyer, early 1920s (courtesy Franke Photography); lithograph of biplane (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division).

Cover design: Teresa Wheeler

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Montgomery, Christine, author.

Marie Meyer Fower : barnstormer / Christine Montgomery.

pages cm.—(Notable Missourians)

Summary: "When Marie Meyer got her pilot's license in 1921, she was one of the first women in Missouri to qualify to fly an airplane. But Marie was not just a pilot, she was a barnstormer and wing walker. Marie and her Flying Circus traveled around the Midwest performing daring aerial stunts for eager crowds. She would stand on the wings of a plane while it flew at 100 miles per hour, or jump from a plane with a parachute. In a time when few women ran their own businesses, Marie ran her Flying Circus for seven years and was active in the early years of aviation. Most importantly, Marie showed people that women could do anything."—Provided by publisher.

Audience: Ages 10-12.

Audience: Grades 4 to 6.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-61248-149-4 (library binding : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-1-61248-150-0 (e-book)

1. Fower, Marie Meyer, 1899-1956—Juvenile literature. 2. Women air pilots—United States—Biography—Juvenile literature. 3. Air pilots—United States—Biography—Juvenile literature. 4. Aeronautics—United States—History—Juvenile literature. I. Title.

TL540.F69M66 2015

629.13092—dc23

2015012031

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Introduction

In 1921, Marie Meyer, a young woman from St. Louis, Missouri, earned her pilot's license. In the early twentieth century, most people believed that women should focus on being wives and mothers and should not have careers. Working women were expected to quit their jobs or were forced to quit after they married. But some women had dreams of a different future. Marie's dream was to fly airplanes, and she was one of the first women in Missouri to qualify for a pilot's license.

Marie bought her own airplane and formed the Marie Meyer Flying Circus. They traveled around the Midwest performing daring aerial stunts for eager crowds. She would stand on a wing of a plane while it flew at 100 miles per hour, or jump from a plane with a parachute. Many people had never seen an airplane, let alone seen someone jump from a plane or stand on the wings. They were astounded by Marie's daring.

In a time when few women ran their own businesses, Marie ran the flying circus for seven years, and was active in the early years of aviation. Most importantly, Marie showed people that women could do anything. 



chapter 1

Growing Up in the Early Days of Aviation

Marie Meyer was born in Illinois on January 17, 1899. When Marie was still an infant, her parents moved the family to St. Louis, Missouri. John Meyer, her father, worked as a day laborer and later as a clerk in Porter's Dry Goods Store. Her mother, Dora, worked at home caring for Marie and her younger siblings, Frances, Felicity, Harvey, and John Jr.

Because the Meyer family lived in a city and were not very well off, they probably lived in an apartment

building rather than a house. Children in farming families had to help with the work on the farm, but children living in cities often worked too. In the early 1900s, it was common for young children to work selling newspapers, shining shoes, or running errands for businesses. We do not know whether the Meyer children worked, but they surely would have attended school. By 1910, Missouri required all children to attend school until they were sixteen years old.

In the 1910s, many cities began to build parks so that children living in the city would have a place to play. There were some small parks in St. Louis, but Marie and



In 1913, Henry Ford opened the first moving assembly line to mass produce automobiles, but cars were still very expensive and most people could not afford to buy one. Cities in the early 1900s were smaller and more compact than they are today, so people could get around by walking or taking trolleys.



Chapter 3

The Flying Circus

By 1922, Marie Meyer's Flying Circus was traveling the countryside as "barnstormers." This was a term for pilots who traveled from town to town and performed aerial tricks with their own planes. Often they would rent a farmer's field so they would have an area big enough to take off and land their planes. Sometimes local companies and even towns would hire a flying circus to perform as a way of promoting their businesses. Shows would often begin with the planes flying very close together over the town. This would attract a lot of attention and people would follow

the planes to the field and buy their tickets for the show. Often so many people came to see a show that business owners would close for the day.

In the United States in 1920, planes were still in the experimental stage and flying was a dangerous occupation. Many pilots and aerial acrobats were injured during their flights and some even died.



Many barnstormers worked alone, but some formed flying circuses, like Marie's. With Bertie (left) and Charles (center), Marie traveled around the country selling airplane rides and performing stunts. Barnstorming was one of the most popular forms of entertainment during the 1920s.



Chapter 4

A Daredevil Performance

In the summer of 1924, the St. Louis Flying Club asked the Marie Meyer Flying Circus to do a benefit performance for the St. Louis airfield, which had recently been renamed after Albert Lambert. To promote the July 4 event, the club asked Marie if she would stand atop her plane as it flew between buildings in downtown St. Louis. The St. Louis Safety Council objected, saying it was too dangerous, but Marie agreed to do it.



Lambert Field was created after the Aero Club of St. Louis leased land in 1920 to use as an airfield. In 1925, Albert Lambert bought the field and added hangars and a passenger terminal. Lambert sold the airport to the City of St. Louis in 1928, and it became the first public airport in the United States.


During the Roaring Twenties, as the 1920s were called, there was a lot of interest and excitement about new technology like airplanes and automobiles. Many people wanted to try new things—or watch other people try new things. Daring stunts like Marie's were popular. The more dangerous the stunt, the more excited people were about seeing it.

The stunt was scheduled to take place on June 24 at 12:30 p.m., when workers would be taking a lunch break. Thousands of people spent their lunch hour

Women and Aviation

Today millions of people travel by airplane every day. But just one hundred years ago, plane travel was new and often dangerous. In a time when few men—and even fewer women—learned to fly, Marie Fower followed her dream and became a pilot.

Early aviators took many risks as they improved airplane designs and made airplane travel available to the public. By the middle of the twentieth century, airplane travel was common and people began looking to the stars. Space travel was still in its infancy in 1963 when Russia sent Valentina Tereshkova on a solo flight into space. In 1983, Sally Ride was the first American woman to become an astronaut when she served on the crew of the space shuttle *Challenger*.

In the early twentieth century, many people did not believe women had the strength or courage to learn how to fly. Women like Marie helped change attitudes about what women could do. Today there are fewer barriers to women entering any profession they choose, thanks to pioneers like Marie Fower. 

Timeline

- January 17, 1899:** Marie was born in Illinois to John and Dora Meyer. The family moved to St. Louis shortly after her birth.
- 1903:** The Wright Brothers achieved the first powered, sustained airplane flight.
- 1910:** Theodore Roosevelt became the first American president to fly in an airplane.
- 1911:** The Aero Club of St. Louis hosted an air meet at Forest Park Airfield.
- 1912:** Albert Berry became the first person in the world to successfully parachute from an airplane.
- 1914–1918:** World War I took place in Europe, and airplanes were used in warfare.
- 1918–1921:** Marie Meyer took flying lessons from William Robertson at his base in Forest Park.
- June 1920:** Albert Lambert, of the Aero Club of St. Louis, bought land for an airfield, and Robertson moved his flying business to the new airfield. Later, the City of St. Louis bought the airfield and renamed it Lambert Field.
- 1921:** Robertson took Marie to the Missouri Centennial Celebration in Sedalia; Marie received her pilot's license, bought a plane, and offered sightseeing tours.
- 1922:** Marie formed the Marie Meyer Flying Circus and performed around the country and in Mexico.
- 1924:** Marie married her pilot Charles L. Fower and became Marie Meyer Fower.
- May 1927:** Charles Lindbergh piloted the first solo non-stop transatlantic flight from New York to Paris.
- 1928:** Marie ended the Flying Circus. Marie and Charles moved to Macon. Walt Disney released a cartoon titled "Plane Crazy" in honor of Lindbergh's famous flight. The main character was a mouse named Steamboat Willie. Later Steamboat Willie became known as Mickey Mouse.
- June 1937:** Amelia Earhart attempts to fly around the world, but disappears over the Pacific Ocean.
- December 1953:** Marie and Charles were honored by the St. Louis Chapter of the National Aviation Association for their contribution to aviation.
- May 24, 1956:** Marie Meyer Fower died in car crash.
- 1965:** Charles Fower donated the Fowers' private airstrip to the city of Macon. It became the Macon Fower Memorial Airport.

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St. Louis Mercantile Library, St. Louis Globe-Democrat Collection (M-112): p. 35, cartoon of Marie Fower from *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, November 26, 1944.

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Marie Meyer Fower

When Marie Meyer got her pilot's license in 1921, she was one of the first women in Missouri to qualify to fly an airplane. But Marie was not just a pilot, she was a barnstormer and a wing-walker. Marie and her Flying Circus traveled around the midwestern United States and Mexico performing daring aerial stunts for eager crowds. She would stand on the wings of a plane while it flew at 100 miles per hour, or jump from a plane with a parachute. In a time when few women managed their own businesses, Marie ran her Flying Circus for seven years. Early aviators like Marie Fower showed people an exciting new technology that would soon transform how people travel.

Christine Montgomery has authored numerous articles and essays on Missouri history. She co-edited *Merit, Not Sympathy, Wins: The Life and Times of Blind Boone*. She also was a contributing writer and co-editor for *Columbia, Missouri: Images of Our Lives since 1901*. She has worked as a university grant writer and a photograph specialist for the State Historical Society of Missouri.

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ISBN 978-1-61248-149-4



9 781612 481494