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Navigating with Harriet Quimby

The aviatrix sits in her Blériot plane in this undated photo.

By Rachael Peckham

My maternal grandmother Ruth never missed an episode of the game show *Jeopardy!* One night in 2008, while I was working on my dissertation about a long-forgotten aviatrix with whom my family and I share connections, Grandma Ruth called to tell me about a *Jeopardy!* clue she had just heard: "The first woman to fly across the English Channel." My grandmother was reserved and soft-spoken, but I imagine her slapping the armrests of the recliner, disturbing the outstretched cat at her side, and beating all three contestants to the buzzer: "Who is Harriet Quimby?" — the subject of my dissertation.

Grandma Ruth didn't tell me if anyone got it right or mistakenly replied "Amelia Earhart." (In fact, Quimby served as Earhart's predecessor and idol.) No, my grandmother rang to say that partly due to my dissertation — and, I suspect, partly due to hometown ties — she had guessed correctly. Still, my hunch is that even if a *Jeopardy!* contestant knew the answer, most of America didn't. And still doesn't. It baffles me that a woman once world famous for her courage and talent (not to mention beauty), a trailblazer who soared over the English Channel on a glorified bicycle with wings, remains little more than an obscure question on a television game show.

Quimby's background

America's first aviatrix grew up in Coldwater, Mich. Motivated by the Homestead Act, her parents, William and Ursula Quimby, claimed 160 acres and a quiet setting for William to recover from injuries and illness he had suffered as a Union soldier in the Civil War. They instead encountered fierce winters in a wilderness full of predators, bugs, and a dense knot of hardwood trees difficult to clear. Three of the five Quimby children died during this time from disease, and the family fell into foreclosure on their mortgage. They fled to California, where Ursula attempted to wipe the slate clean. She staked her hopes on the bright and pretty Harriet, moving her youngest daughter's birthday up from 1875 to 1884 and elevating her social status; under the new, significantly younger and more privileged upbringing Ursula constructed, Harriet was born nine years later in Arroyo Grande, Calif., to wealthy parents and educated in Europe.

The fiction only fuels my fascination while posing a challenge for this essay. How do I pay tribute to a figure who helped rewrite her past? Is there any honor — a word closely linked to honesty — in Quimby's perpetuation of the lie?

Or was the real falsehood the prevailing sociopolitical belief that women were largely inferior to men? Perhaps she told as much truth as the world could handle. Maybe Quimby found a way — not through deception or complicity, but through adaptation and innovation — to reach a larger and more important truth about what women could do.

On every front, Quimby was fearless. Though living in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, she drove a car, smoked, and remained single, defying expectations that women serve as angels of the house. Quimby seemed impervious to any obstacle that threatened to get in her way, literally hiking up her skirt — designing the first flight suit by adding snaps and turning it into

knickerbockers in her trademark purple satin — and forging a new path. And she made headlines everywhere: on the stage in San Francisco, where she worked as a drama critic; on the page in New York, where she wrote for *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*; and, ultimately, in the air, where she became a luminary.

Her interest in flight began in 1910 after covering a tournament and charming the aviator John Moisant, who agreed to give her lessons (along with his brother Alfred). The brazen Quimby dressed in drag and crept to the airfield at dawn to meet Moisant so no one could usurp the young woman at the controls of such a new and dangerous machine.

Eventually, newspapers found her out, maybe through a tip from Quimby,[1] who thrilled at the exposure. "I have written so much about other people," she remarked, "you can't guess how much I enjoy sitting back and reading about myself for once. I think that's excusable in me."[2]

On Aug. 1, 1911, Quimby became the first American woman to earn a pilot's license — no small feat for either gender, considering the difficulty of merely steering an aeroplane and the rigors of the exam, detailed by historian Eileen Lebow in her 2002 book *Before Amelia: Women Pilots in the Early Days of Aviation:*

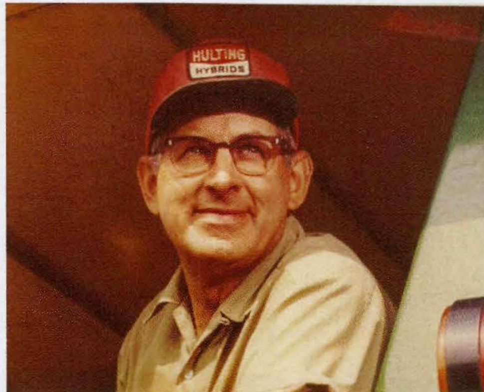
> The pilot must be eighteen years of age; must pass two distance tests, without touching the ground, of no less than five kilometers in a close circuit, indicated by two posts five hundred meters from each other; and must make a series of uninterrupted figure eights changing direction at each post. He or she must make an altitude flight of at least fifty meters above the starting point and land the machine within 165 feet of the point, designated before the flight, with the motor turned off when the aeroplane touches the ground.[3]

Quimby missed the landing on her first attempt, but rebounded phenomenally on her second, landing 7 feet, 9 inches from the designated point, close to the world record of 3 feet, 4 inches. Exiting the plane, Quimby declared, "Well, I guess I get that license."[4]

She starred in aviation meets and at state fairs. Quimby flew before President Woodrow Wilson (who struggled to speak publicly above the plane's noise) at a county fair on Staten Island and for Mexican president Francisco Madero at his inaugural celebration.[5] By early 1912, she achieved a dream few women have realized in flight even today: national celebrity. Men sent her letters proposing marriage. The press nicknamed her America's Bird Woman. And since her physical beauty attracted as much attention as her flying skills, the press also dubbed her the Dresden China Aviatrix, most likely for her porcelain-like complexion.

All the while, she wrote professionally about the enterprise: of her feats and experiences in learning to fly; of the dangers involved and the precautions required; and of the potential for aviation — especially in the capable hands of women — to evolve from a sport and an entertainment to industries for travel and mail delivery. In an article for *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, she foresaw that "women could and would fly passengers and freight, take aerial photographs, train students, and do everything connected with aviation."[6]

In the largest public campaign so far to honor her, the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative 50-cent airmail stamp of the "pioneer pilot" on April 27, 1991. In a *Chicago Tribune* article the next day, reporter Dominic Sama proclaimed it "an expedient way for a government to recognize contributions of a little-known person who has been obscured by time."[7] But the stamp is out of print — ironically, "obscured by time" — and Quimby remains "a little-known person." A fate, I would think, she'd deem worse than death.



Bob Smith

My family's background

Quimby's obscurity registers a loss for me, and I claim such a personal stake in her, for numerous reasons. I was raised in Coldwater like Quimby. We both were the youngest daughter of a farmer. Not far from where the Quimby family once farmed, my maternal grandfather, Bob Smith (Grandma Ruth's husband), and two sons, my uncles Doug and Dean, operated a 500-acre cattle farm.

The Smith men were as handsome as Quimby was pretty, with thick wavy hair and strong jaw lines — the prototypical good looks of Midwestern farmers. Their good nature and playfulness endeared them even more to Coldwater folks, who knew the men to tease a friend occasionally with a cow patty in hand and a slap hello on the back.

On Sept. 16, 1976, Bob, Doug, and Dean postponed the start of harvest season to attend the Farmfest machinery show in Mankato, Minn. They loved their livelihood, farming side by side as father and sons, just like their forebears, but Doug and Dean — not unlike Quimby — were progressive; they wanted Smith River Farms to modernize and expand, despite their father's apprehension about the cost. Bob had paid off the farm's loans — an accomplishment for any farmer, then and now — thanks to prudent decisions such as starting a side business selling and repairing chain saws. I suppose Bob wasn't crazy about dropping everything to go to Farmfest with his sons — with all those crops to get in — so they commissioned local pilot Clifford Hadley to expedite the trip.

Saying goodbye to Ruth, a nurse with her own duties, the Smith men arrived safely that morning. They spent the day, I further imagine, wandering around a maze of exhibits showcasing the latest farm technology and pausing to buy roasted nuts, fresh lemonade, or a handmade craft for my grandma. When it came time to depart, their minds brimming and feet tired and stomachs full, I'm sure, my grandfather and uncles were happy to board the plane and catch some rest, with the harvest awaiting them.

The plane took off at 6:30 p.m. A light rain was falling in Coldwater. The sky had turned overcast.

Quimby's crash

Quimby made good money touring and performing exhibition flights with Moisant International Aviators. She declined any gig that didn't meet her price and refused to fly on Sundays. Still, according to biographer Lebow, Quimby had to keep working, despite the dangers, with a new plane to pay off and aging parents to support.[8]

She agreed to fly at the Harvard-Boston Aviation Meet on July 1, 1912, for a whopping $100,000 over a 7-day event. A crowd of 5,000 gathered to watch her transport air meet manager William A. P. Willard across Dorchester Bay, around the Boston Light, and back. On the return from the lighthouse, something went wrong. The two-seat plane pitched forward, and the multitude squinted in horror at two black forms tumbling through the air. Quimby and Willard had fallen out — seatbelts were not yet standard — plummeting 1,000 feet and dying on impact in the mud flats. Yet her new Blériot plane glided to a stop nearby with minimal damage.[9] Quimby, who had her pilot's license less than one year, was 37. Quimby's parents and her older sister, Kittie, were her only survivors.

Rumors and theories about the accident flooded conversation and news. Some blamed Quimby's speed and maneuvers, reinforcing the attitude that women had no business performing such a dangerous sport. Some blamed the temperamental Blériot monoplane, with its easily-tangled wires and front-heavy engine. Some blamed Willard, allegedly warned by Quimby's manager not to make any sudden movements while in flight, for fear that the Blériot might buck and throw them out.

For the most part, articles make no mention of Quimby's injuries. But the writing about Willard's is candid: "The post-mortem examination showed that Willard had sustained a fractured skull, fractures of the spine in two places, that his chest had been crushed in, and one of his legs broken, besides other internal injuries."[10] In place of Quimby's autopsy is a celebration of her Victorian feminine virtues — "on her face was a calm, sweet expression"[11] — effectively transforming America's Bird Woman into an angel.

The nation could not fathom vulgar suffering for its heroine. But such treatment commits a different kind of violence on its subject — slow asphyxiation atop a pedestal, from which there's no escape, air is in short supply, and every breath is knife-sharp and tight.

My family's crash

Quimby's wreck would not be the last flight to

end in tragedy for my hometown. Sixty-four years later, my relatives — compelled like Quimby to fly for an exhibition — boarded a plane that veered wildly off course during its second attempt to land and crashed in a cornfield, killing all on board: Bob, 54, Doug, 28, and Dean, 18, plus pilot Clifford Hadley, 52, and two other men from the area, James Troyer, 22, and James Nowak, 43. The plane, a twin-engine Beechcraft, missed its approach into Branch County Memorial Airport — site of a large historical marker honoring Quimby — and hit the ground at such a high rate of speed that it plunged several feet underground and caused the fuel to vaporize.

Neighbors quoted in news articles said the plane circled low over their houses and made a strange, high-pitched sound seconds before the smash. One worried that it would ram into her house. Another, a former flight attendant, hypothesized that the pilot had a heart attack or became seriously ill "and that one of the passengers, seeing what was happening, might have taken over the controls."[12]

Of all the conjecture, I believe my brother Jonathan — ironically, a career pilot — comes closest to explaining the mishap. Reviewing the National Transportation Safety Board report, Jon concludes the pilot suffered "spatial disorientation," a phenomenon occurring in flight when obscured visibility confuses one's sense of direction and the body loses its bearings. This might explain, Jon says, why Hadley circled repeatedly before accelerating toward ground; "Instead of trusting his instruments, he listened to his body."

It is difficult to think that, as with Quimby, pilot error caused the crash — for my brother flies and refuels military jets midair at 10,000 feet. His job, involving one of the most dangerous feats in aviation, has no room for pilot error. But Jon, born six years after the crash, is as calm and instinctive as he is talented — a combination Quimby attributed to herself: "There is something about 'nauting' [flying] that robs you of any nervous reactions. ... There is no reason to be afraid so long as one is careful."[13]

The legacy of reckonings

Yet I am afraid of flying. When I do board a plane, I count the seats between mine and the nearest exit, in case the cabin fills with smoke and I must grope my way out. I sit by the window, preferably over the wing, where I can monitor the engine. When I have to fly across a large body of water — to teach a course abroad, say — I down a preflight cocktail and, in turbulence, a Xanax.

I am the only one in my family to harbor this fear. At age 3 or 4, Jon declared his dream of flying and has never deviated from it, receiving his pilot's license at 18. My mother, Diane, demonstrated her own bravery and faith by agreeing to his flight lessons. She was all of 26 when her father and brothers died and raising a four-year-old (my older sister Sarah) and an infant (my other brother Mark) with my father, Michael, a farmer who works to carry on his own family's long tradition in the fields.

After cajoling and reassurance from Jon, I agreed in spring 2002 to board the two-seater Cessna he had learned to fly in to get an aerial view of our farm — and because I figured such a perspective would serve my writing. My legs were drum-tight and my knuckles white, but somehow, being in the cockpit with Jon and scanning the green and yellow patchwork of fields that our family has farmed for almost two centuries helped. I could see in every direction, determine where we were going, and judge our height and distance in relationship to everything around us. I will never forget that liberation, that security.

Nor the terror of imagining what my grandfather and uncles felt as they dove blindly toward a field in the dark. And I'm not alone.

"Please don't make your mother revisit that time," my father pleaded when, in service of my dissertation, I began researching our family tragedy, which was spoken of only in hushed tones during the "Prayers of the People" in church for the dearly departed. I don't begrudge my dad, who still winces at the memory of such profound grief. I know that he, too, suffered greatly with the loss of Bob, Doug, and Dean — whose shared livelihoods and friendships made them more than in-laws — and especially with having to put down the phone and deliver the news of their deaths to my mother. Almost 40 years after the crash, my mom still retreats into herself at times, weeping in a way that frightens me, without sound, as though something has her tightly by the throat.

What triggers her memory, her grief? I imagine a lot of things: uncovering her senior organ recital, which older brother Doug (divorced at the time of the crash) recorded for her; reading her father's love letters to Ruth, bundled in the bottom of my grandmother's hope chest; and contemplating her youngest son's striking resemblance to her younger brother Dean, with their thin and lanky frames, oval-shaped faces, closely-set blue eyes, even identical handwriting — a likeness so strong that, growing up, Jon learned to answer to the name Dean.

All of this is to say, my mother habitually revisits that time. How can she not? Perhaps this explains why my mother understands my desire to rediscover Quimby — a search that began, I see now, when a tragic flight three years before my birth robbed me of the chance to know my grandfather and uncles.

The legacy of words

To assist with my writing, my mother began journaling about the accident, sensing it would be easier to write than speak details. The terrible phone call received in the middle of the night. The smelling salts she needed at sight of the three closed caskets. The funeral director's offer to lay an outfit in each one. The desire to touch her dad's hands. The reassurance from 4-year-old Sarah "that they'll come back, Mommy, don't worry."

One day my mother retrieved a large, tattered envelope from a top shelf and handed the package to me. Inside, a dozen clippings from tri-state area newspapers told the story of how 200 volunteers organized a "harvest bee" one month after the crash to gather my grandfather and uncles' grain and feed their cattle.[14] Farmers, interrupting their own labors, brought $2 million of equipment to help. Granaries closed their doors to everyone but the volunteers. Goods and food were donated. More than 70 women cooked and served lunch. In photos, farmers throw an arm around Grandma Ruth, who smiles and clutches a handkerchief in one hand. The day was reported as rainy and overcast — same as the night of the accident — but by mid-afternoon, all 500 acres were finished, yielding 60,000 bushels of grain.

My grandmother, whose 53rd birthday fell days later, sold the crops and cattle. Although my family retains much of the farmland — her seven grandchildren now owning Smith River Farms — she moved out of the house she had shared with Bob and their youngest son, Dean, who was about to enroll as a freshman at Michigan State University, and bought a ranch house in town, where she lived until dying in 2009 at age 86.

A few years ago, Doug's best friend, now in his mid-60s, commented in an interview that the crash "changed so many people's lives." This friend, then a hired hand at Smith River Farms, had planned on attending Farmfest with Bob and Doug, but at the last minute "had a bad feeling" about the trip, and backed out. Telling me this, he removed a handkerchief from the back pocket of his overalls to wipe dampness from his glasses.

The same survivor's guilt struck Harry Willard, son of Quimby's passenger, William Willard. The morning of the flight, the Willards flipped a coin for the seat. William won. Harry, a young man, watched the catastrophe from the shore while "weeping bitterly,"[15] as spectators fainted or shielded their eyes.

Others hurtled waves to reach the victims, springing into action — just as farmers did for my family.

"Whether we be strangers or neighbors," Quimby once reflected, "the instinct to go to the rescue is always the same."[16]

If the deaths of Quimby and my relatives teach me anything, it's this: Desires that drive us to great heights — and lead us sometimes to greater loss — are grounded in our resolve, our resilience, to move forward, pulling each other up along the way.

My impulse to honor their memory recovers them the only way I know how: to get them back in the air. ●

Rachael Peckham, Associate Professor of English at Marshall University, her Phi Kappa Phi chapter, specializes in creative nonfiction, autobiography, and 20th-century American literature. Her 2010 chapbook *Muck Fire* (Spring Garden Press) won the Robert Watson Poetry Prize from *The Greensboro Review*. Her work also earned the 2006 *Briar Cliff Review* Nonfiction Prize. She further received a 2012 Love of Learning Award from Phi Kappa Phi and a 2011 Distinguished Artists and Scholars Award from Marshall. Peckham co-coordinates the school's visiting writers series and literary magazine. Email her at peckham@marshall.edu.

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