

Women of the Air

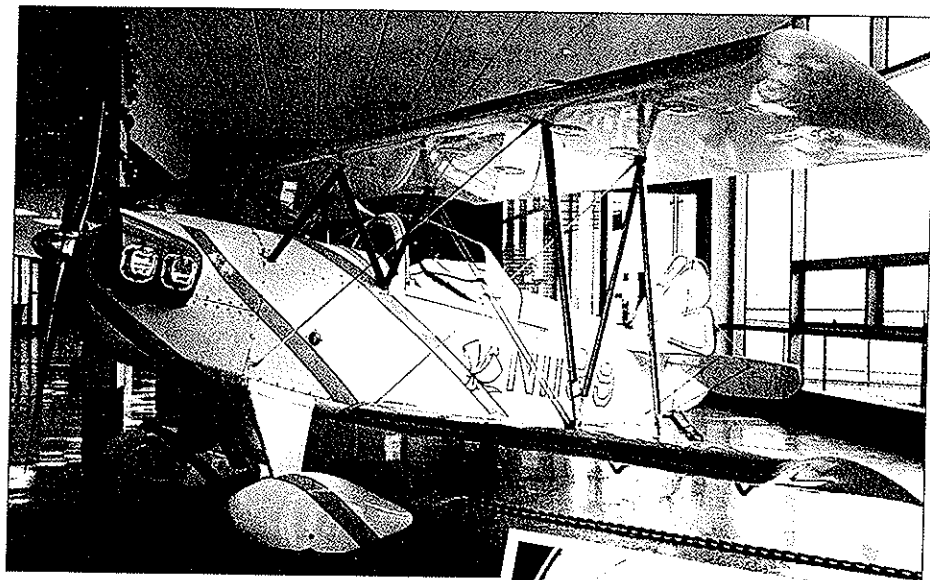
Last summer saw the opening of a new museum with a unique theme: the International Women's Air and Space Museum.

LAURA TAXEL reports from Cleveland, Ohio

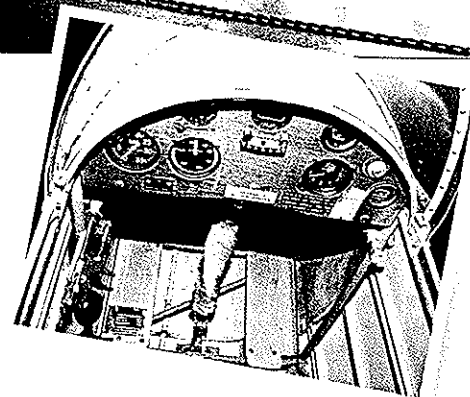
Sixty-eight-year-old American Joan Hrubec became interested in flying as a teenager during the Second World War. All of her male cousins were pilots, and she built models of their aeroplanes, entered local model competitions and, to the chagrin of all the boys, won consistently.

When she graduated from high school, Joan told her parents that she wanted to learn to fly. In those days relatively few women were involved in aviation. Hoping to discourage his unconventional daughter, Joan's father agreed, on condition that she found an all-women's institution offering flying training. He thought it would be an impossible task, but she did it. "I knew what I wanted," says Hrubec, "and it didn't bother me that everybody thought it was unusual for a girl wanting to fly."

In 1949 Joan graduated from Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri, with her pilot's licence. She bought her first aeroplane in 1953, was copilot of the winning team in the 1955 "Angel Derby", an all-female Canada—Florida air race, and was named "Ohio Woman Pilot of the Year" in 1957. She has been flying ever since, and now she is part of the team that is getting the new International Women's Air and Space Museum (IWASM) at



ABOVE This Smith Miniplane, built by Tracy Pilurs, is the centrepiece of the IWASM's exhibition hall. **RIGHT** The Miniplane's cockpit.



Burke Lakefront Airport, Cleveland, Ohio, off the ground. The official ribbon-cutting ceremony took place on August 27, 1999.

Cleveland is a fitting site for the IWASM, as the city was the terminus for the first Women's Air Derby, held in 1929.



ABOVE Blanche Noyes, a star of silent films, was one of Ohio's first licensed women pilots.



ABOVE Lady Mary Bailey was the first woman to fly from London to Cape Town, using a D.H.60G Moth.

**"I've been asked why women need a museum of their own.
My response is that every museum is a men's museum"**

The Museum's aim is to celebrate the little-known accomplishments of women in aviation history, to document their continuing contributions and to encourage girls to pursue careers in aviation and space science. It is one of the few institutions worldwide to focus on women's achievements in air and space.

Connie Luhta is president of the museum's board of trustees. Like Joan, she is a pilot and a competitive flyer. In common with other members of the board, they are unconventional and adventurous women. Connie's love affair with aviation began in 1961, when she was 32. A friend took her up in his aeroplane, put her in the copilot's seat and suggested she take over while he ate a sandwich. "I was hooked immediately," says Luhta, "and began flying lessons, got a licence a year later, and had no problem with the fact that piloting a 'plane wasn't really something women did. I was raised to think girls could do anything. At Ohio Wesleyan University I majored in chemistry and often was the only female in class". She soon discovered she was not the only woman with a passion for aviation.

Both Luhta and Hrubec are long-time members of the Ohio chapter of the Ninety-Nines, an association of female pilots formed in the 1920s and named after the 99 charter members. The group began acquiring memorabilia from its founders; women who had accomplished many piloting firsts for females. The idea of creating a museum was evolved to make this unique collection accessible to the public. That was 20 years ago. For 12

years, the IWASM's collection was kept in a small historic building in Centerville, Ohio, near Dayton, home of the Wright brothers, but acquisitions as well as the vision of the museum quickly outgrew that location. After three years of searching and negotiating, through the efforts of an extraordinarily dedicated group of volunteers, the museum has found a new home at Burke Lakefront Airport, a small municipal airport on Cleveland's burgeoning "Museum Row".

The area is also home to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Great Lakes Science Center and two "floating museums", the *USS Cod*, a Second World War submarine, and the steamship *Mather*. City officials have given the IWASM their enthusiastic assistance, providing a seven-year rent-free lease for the exhibition space. It is described as a "must see" destination for anyone interested in aviation history, and the museum's officials expect 100,000 visitors annually.

"I am captivated by the idea of preserving this important piece of women's history," says board president Connie Luhta, "and committed to the effort of sharing the stories of their achievements with the public. I've been asked why women need a special museum of their own; after all, there's no such thing as a men's museum. My response is that every museum is a men's museum, and these institutions have tended to overlook what women have done."

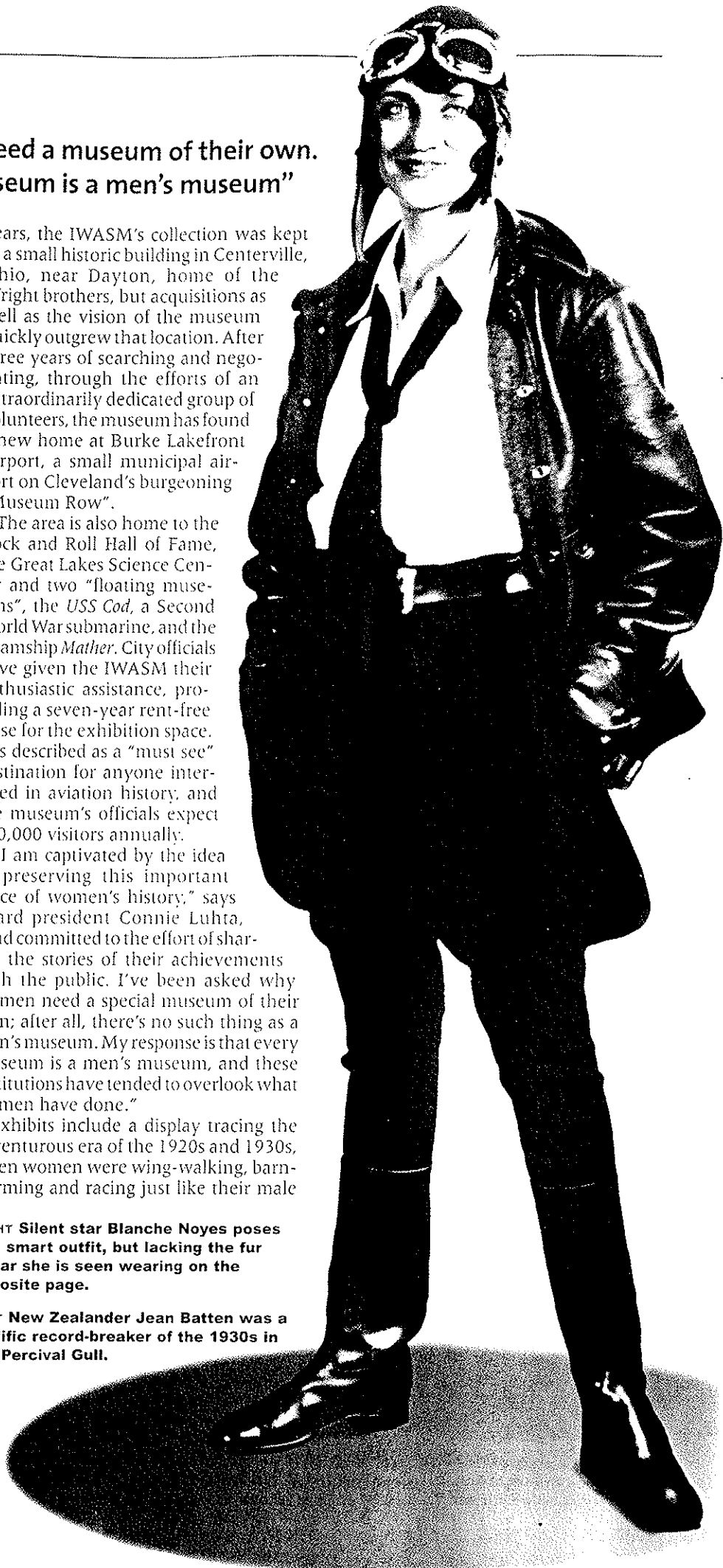
Exhibits include a display tracing the adventurous era of the 1920s and 1930s, when women were wing-walking, barnstorming and racing just like their male

RIGHT Silent star **Blanche Noyes** poses in a smart outfit, but lacking the fur collar she is seen wearing on the opposite page.

LEFT New Zealander **Jean Batten** was a prolific record-breaker of the 1930s in her *Percival Gull*.



Aeroplane, May 2000



MUSEUM REPORT

“Among the extraordinary women featured in the IWASM’s exhibits is Harriet Quimby, the first woman to obtain a pilot’s licence”



ABOVE This mannequin in the IWASM is modelling the flight suit dress designed by Harriet Quimby in 1912.



ABOVE A general view of the entrance hall of the IWASM. RIGHT Part of the museum's tribute to Jacqueline Cochran, the first woman to break the "sound barrier".



counterparts; another that highlights flying women's contribution to the war effort; and a third reminding us that women are also part of mankind's journey into space.

Among the extraordinary women featured in IWASM's exhibits, which occupy the lobby and west concourse of the Burke Lakefront terminal, are Harriet Quimby, who, in 1911, was the first woman to obtain a pilot's licence and designer of a special ladies flying suit, which hid a pair of trousers beneath a panel that gave the appearance that the wearer was properly attired in a skirt; Blanche Noyes, star of silent films and one of Ohio's first licensed woman pilots, who took John D. Rockefeller, then in his nineties, for the only flight of his life; and Bessie Coleman, the first African-American female aviator. Others featured include Ruth Nichols, holder of three 1929 women's world records for altitude, speed and non-stop flight (Oakland to Louisville); Jackie Cochran, who formed the Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASPS) after serving with the Air Transport Auxiliary in England, flew a bomber across the Atlantic in 1941 and, as a jet pilot, was the first woman to break the "sound barrier" in 1953; Louise Sacchi, the RAF's first female navigation instructor, author of a navigation training manual used by the military, and the only woman to receive the Cross of Aeronautical Merit from the Spanish Air Ministry; and, of course, Amelia Earhart.

They have a lock of Amelia Earhart's hair and her flying suit; a dress that belonged to Katherine Wright, sister of the Wright brothers and an instrumental behind-the-scenes figure in the development and promotion of their aeroplanes; log books, the Smith Miniplane built by

Tracy Pilurs, and a treasure trove of silver cups and trophies won by women.

The Museum's library and research centre, which contains an incredible archive of fascinating vintage photographs of women flyers from the early days, is one of its most important assets, and an invaluable tool for researchers. Its files contain information on women aviators from around the world, including



ABOVE Record-setting American aviatrix Jacqueline Cochran poses in front of a garlanded Beech 17 Staggerwing.

RIGHT Lady Heath, formerly Mrs Sophie Elliott-Lynn, completed a number of impressive flights and was elected Lady Champion Aviator by the USA.

Britain's Sheila Scott, the first English-woman to fly an aeroplane around the world; Lady Bailey, the first woman to complete a flight from London to Cape Town, flying a two-seat, open-cockpit de Havilland Moth; Amy Johnson, who flew solo from England to Australia in 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ days; and the woman who broke Amy's record, New Zealander Jean Batten.

The IWASM hopes to become a repository for additional artefacts, information and memorabilia about women of the air. The Exchange Club of Cleveland, the organisation that sponsored the 1929 Women's Air Derby, recently stumbled upon the original negatives of the banquet dinner honouring the race participants. All the women who flew are seated together at the front of the hall. The Club donated the negatives to the IWASM which is keen to acquire more such material like this, and actively seeks donations.

The IWASM is a unique showcase for the contributions women have made to flight, as balloonists and barnstormers, astronauts and aerospace engineers. The Museum is also joining with the NASA/Glenn Research Center to loan exhibitions and promote "outreach" and educational programmes to interest young women in fields such as astronomy, aviation technology, propulsion science and space exploration. Hrubec and Luhta make ideal spokespersons; their own choices and accomplishments mirror those of the pioneering women achievers the IWASM salutes. They might all be described as women who know how to get things off the ground.



ABOVE Amelia Earhart flew six Lockheed Vegas during her career — and in May 1932 became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic.



ABOVE Sheila Scott was the first woman to fly an aeroplane around the world, claiming several records in 1966 in Comanche G-ATOY.

IWASM newsletter

Museum members receive copies of the IWASM's quarterly newsletter. Admission to the museum's exhibition hall is free. It is located at Burke Lakefront Airport, 1501 North Marginal Road, Cleveland, Ohio 44114, USA. The telephone number is 001 216 623-1111 (fax 001 216 623-1113). For more information, or to become a supporting member, visit its website at <http://www.iwasm.org>