

Nellie Zabel Willhite *COMMUNITY SERVICE*



A young deaf woman named Nellie Zabel Willhite was among those to catch the "flying bug." From Yankton, born in 1892, she had been deaf since the age of four. Nellie attended SDSU from 1900 to 1902. Nellie knew there were two barriers to overcome: first, she was a woman and second, she was deaf. Nevertheless, she enrolled in a class as the thirteenth student in a class of eighteen and after thirteen hours of instruction she received her license in 1928. Nellie became the first deaf woman in South Dakota and most likely the first deaf person in the world to become a pilot.

Nellie's father gave her a plane as a gift after receiving her license and she began flying in air shows and participating in air races throughout the Midwest. Nellie had the number 13 painted on her plane, hence proving the old superstition wrong. She took passengers on rides at county fairs charging children fifty cents and adults a dollar. Willhite was a charter member of the Ninety Nines, a woman's pilot organization of which Amelia Earhart was one of the founding members.

The original propeller of her plane, an Eagle Rock, which she named the "Pard" after her father, is on permanent display in the Taylor Museum at Hill City, South Dakota. Nellie comments, "Even though I could barely hear the engine roar, I could sure tell right away if anything was wrong-just from the vibrations." Flying became a second nature to her.