

Nellie Zabel Willhite

November 22, 1892 – September 2, 1991

Nellie Zabel Willhite, 98, a pioneering Deaf aviator and South Dakota's first woman pilot, died Monday, September 2, 1991, at Covington Heights Care Center in Sioux Falls. Her determination and adventurous spirit helped open the skies to women and Deaf pilots during aviation's early years.

Nellie was born November 22, 1892, near Box Elder in Pennington County, South Dakota, to Charles and Lillian May (Madison) Zabel. Her father hauled freight along the Fort Pierre–Deadwood Trail before becoming a rancher. Nellie became deaf after contracting measles as a young child.



Following her mother's death, she attended the South Dakota School for the Deaf in Sioux Falls. She also spent time in the home of Dr. Leonard and Dollie Mead of Yankton as their foster daughter. On October 30, 1916, she married Dr. F. V. Willhite in Yankton.

Nellie's interest in aviation grew after her first airplane ride in 1919. By 1927, she was spending weekends watching airplanes at Renner Airport near Sioux Falls, where she also worked as an office manager. Encouraged by pilot and instructor Harold Tennant, she decided to learn to fly. Her father provided the money for her lessons, asking only that she never repay him.

She began flight training in November 1927. On January 13, 1928, after just 13 hours of instruction, Nellie completed her first solo flight and became South Dakota's first woman pilot. She was also the flight school's 13th student and considered 13 her lucky number.



With her father's financial support, Nellie purchased an Eaglerock biplane in 1928 and named it "Pard" after his nickname. She proudly painted the name and her lucky number, 13, on the airplane. In "Pard," she carried passengers, appeared at air shows, and took her father above the Fort Pierre–Deadwood Trail he had once traveled as a freighter. She sold the airplane in 1932 when maintenance became too costly.

Nellie earned her commercial pilot's license in 1930. She barnstormed, raced airplanes, performed aerobatics, and carried passengers at fairs, air shows and airport dedications. She also delivered goodwill messages between communities, dropping them by small parachutes made from bedsheets. Her skill and determination established her as a pioneer in Deaf aviation.



Flying offered excitement but also hardship. Aircraft maintenance was expensive, employment was uncertain, and women pilots faced discrimination in hiring and pay. Nellie sold "Pard" in 1932 but continued her involvement in aviation and flew for pleasure in later years.

She was a charter member of the Ninety-Nines, the women pilots' organization whose first president was Amelia Earhart. In 1941, she helped establish its first South Dakota chapter. She also belonged to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary and the Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary.

Nellie's achievements brought lasting honors. She was inducted into the South Dakota Hall of Fame in 1978 and was among the first four inductees into the South Dakota Aviation Hall of Fame. On her 95th birthday, Governor George S. Mickelson proclaimed November 22, 1987, "Nellie Zabel Willhite Day."

Her life began before the Wright brothers' first powered flight and extended into the space age. Through it all, Nellie pursued her ambitions with independence and courage, leaving an enduring place in South Dakota, women's and Deaf aviation history.

Survivors included her nephews and nieces, Eugene Gunther, Lillian Juech and Margaret Hickerson, all of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Emil Gunther of Sheboygan, Wisconsin; two cousins, Stanley and Raymond Madison of Rapid City; and other relatives and friends.

She was preceded in death by her husband; her brother, Carl; and two sisters, Mamie Mahnke and Hazel Gunther.

Funeral services were held September 6, 1991, at George Boom Funeral Home in Sioux Falls, with Dr. Clayton Smith officiating. Burial followed at Yankton Cemetery in Yankton, South Dakota.

