# QUIMBY, HARRIET

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breakfast. Later she would have to go to her office at Leslie's Weekly where she was a reporter and dramatic critic.

Miss Quimby's success as a writer and a flyer could hardly have been predicted from her background. Her biography in the massive, two-volume "Quimby Family" written by one of the New England Quimbys, asserted that she had been born May 1, 1884 on an orange plantation in Arroyo Grande, California, a small, fruit farming community between San Francisco and Los Angeles. It also said she had been tutored in private schools in America and abroad, and was ambitious to become financially independent by age 35 so she could devote the rest of her life to creative writing. As a matter of fact, she was 35 and a little more when that biographic sketch was written. She had been born May 1, 1875 in Coldwater, Michigan, and she had obtained a common school education by dint of her mother's hard work and sacrifice.

Harriet was the youngest of two daughters. Her mother, Ursula, an energetic woman whose older brother was a physician and dean of a medical school, made herb medicines that enjoyed considerable local fame for their curative properties. Harriet's father, William, was a farmer. When he was 30 years old, in 1864, he had volunteered for service in the 188th New York Infantry which was being raised to augment Union forces for the final assault on the South. His enlistment was for a year. In October, 1864 the 188th began a series of engagements against the Confederates in Virginia, the most famous being the battle of Five Forks where it was led by General Phil Sheridan. The 188th was at Appomattox for Lee's surrender, on April 9, 1865, William had served faithfully but without distinction. (His highest rank was Regimental Cook!)

William moved to Arroyo Grande in 1887, where he started a grocery store that failed. From there he moved to Las Gatas where once again he failed in the grocery business. Then the family moved to San Francisco where Mrs. Quimby resumed her practice of making herb medicines, which her husband sold from a wagon; also she augmented the family income by making prune sacks for a fruit packing factory. In 1893, he was adjudged wholly invalid, and eligible for a pension ($12.00 a month!), which he drew until his death in 1922 at age 88.

While Harriet remembered Arroyo Grande with nostalgia, it was in San Francisco, in her late teens and early twenties that she made her mark as a writer. In 1902 she was a staff writer on the San Francisco Dramatic Review. She also worked as a reporter and Sun-

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day feature writer for the San Francisco Call and the Chronicle. As for her ability, Will Irwin, the editor of the Chronicle said, "...she has about the keenest nose for news I ever met with in a woman." She was well-known and liked in literary and theatrical circles, and before the Great Earthquake of 1906 her portrait, painted by her friend Ada Shawhan, hung on a wall in the old Bohemian Club.

Harriet's first article in Leslie's appeared in January 1903. It was entitled "Curious Chinese Customs," and soon was followed by others. Some

time in 1903 she moved to New York City with her mother and her father, who was almost 70 years old. She was a versatile and prolific writer, averaging about an article a week in addition to her regular weekly column on the theater. Around 1911, her writing turned to aviation.

Miss Quimby took quarters in the Victoria Hotel, an eight-story edifice fronting Fifth Avenue, Broadway and Twenty Seventh Street, with "new plunger hydraulic elevators, safest and best in the World, rates $1.50 and upwards."

Harriet's wide circle of friends included leading figures in the small but growing aviation community. Notable among them were Matilde Moisant and Matilde's brothers-John who was making quite a name for himself in flying, and Albert who was a wealthy financier and the founder and owner of Moisant International Aviators.

She said that her interest in aviation began when, in company with Matilde, she attended an aviation meet at Hempstead in the fall of 1910. As she put it, "I...said, I believe I could do that-and I will!

"I went directly to the late John Moisant and told him I wished to learn to fly," she stated. "He replied he was going South to attend various meets but in the Spring it was proposed to open a School of Aviation on Hempstead Plains."

John B. Moisant, whose career as a flyer and soldier of fortune in Central America is a thriller of the first order, was killed in a crash at New Orleans on December 31, 1910. Moisant International Airport at New Orleans is named after him. John was a swinger. People in Gulfport, Mississippi, still talk about how he took up the postmaster's daughter and her friend (daughter of a prominent citizen) for a thrilling, unauthorized ride over the town, thus incurring the undying hero-worship of the young set and the apoplectic animosity of irate parents.

John's tragic death failed to deter Harriet or Matilde, and when the flying school opened in April 1911 they were

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among the first to enroll (for Matilde, much against the wishes of her nine remaining brothers and sisters; for Harriet much against the advice of her aged father, and with the reluctant, apprehensive approbation of her devoted mother).

André Houpert, a Frenchman taught to fly by Bleriot, was instructor for the two girls. He was good, and from time to time was prone to remind Harriet and Matilde of the awesome power they held each time they started up the engine (the equivalent of 30 horses in the small, sputtering, smelly mechanism that revolved on its crankshaft at 1250 revolutions per minute!). Harriet learned much from him in four months and 33 lessons.

Harriet's good friend, Matilde, qualified for her pilot's license two weeks after Harriet, receiving No. 44, becoming the second licensed woman flyer in the U.S. Both girls were promptly invited to join Moisant

International Aviators, and in December of 1911 both flew with the group in an air show at Mexico City honoring newly inaugurated President Madero. Harriet wrote an interesting account of the show for Leslie's Weekly.

The Mexico City air show was not the first exhibition in which Harriet flew. Five weeks after getting her license, on September 2, 1911, she participated in the Richmond County Agricultural Fair on Staten Island. Later that same month she flew in a meet at Nassau Boulevard (Long Island) airfield, defeating a French woman pilot, Mlle. Helene Dutrieu, in a cross-country race and winning a prize of $600.

While in Mexico City, Harriet conceived the idea of becoming the first woman to pilot an aircraft across the English Channel. Less than three years before (July 25, 1909) Bleriot had made the first aerial crossing, and no woman had yet attempted the feat. Shortly after she returned to New York, she sailed to Europe accompanied by her newly acquired manager, A. Leo Stevens.

Stevens was an old hand at aviation, a friend of the Wright brothers, and designer of a successful dirigible. He owned a balloon "foundry" which produced spherical balloons on order, and he held Aero Club License Number 2 as a Balloon Pilot. Later he became one of the first civilian inspectors of aircraft for the U.S. Army.

The flight across the English Channel was a high point in Harriet's flying career. She wrote a complete account of it for Leslie's issue of May 16, 1912 entitled "An American Girl's Daring Exploit." Here are excerpts from the story:

"On the seventh of March I sailed on