

Early Aviation

2017 is the year for some significant centennials. It's the anniversary of the United States' involvement in World War I and it's the 100th anniversary of the passage of a woman suffrage law by the New York State Legislature.

Locally, another event made the news in 1917 – the landing in Genesee Valley Park by a solo female pilot. Dubbed the "Girl Aviator," and described as being nineteen years old, she was actually twenty-six years old and the fourth woman in the U.S. to earn a pilot's license, something she achieved at age twenty-one in 1912. For many years she tried to correct the misperception of her age but was unable to convince reporters to believe her.

On June 24, 1917, Katherine Stinson left Buffalo about 11:00 a.m. and landed on the Baker farm part of Genesee Valley Park about noon. News accounts of the flight say that she followed the New York Central train tracks and maintained an altitude of five hundred feet in order to avoid cloud banks. The plane was a tractor-type aircraft with a forty-six foot wing sweep.

Katherine Stinson's mission was to raise awareness of the Red Cross Fund by flying from city to city, collecting and sharing information about the amounts collected in each place. She also carried "paper bombs" - flyers she dropped as she flew over populated areas. She was welcomed to Rochester by officials of the Automobile Club of Rochester, Eastman Kodak, Bausch & Lomb, and the Rochester Parks Department. Before continuing on her journey, she was given twenty-five gallons of gasoline and five gallons of oil by the Automobile Club.

Katherine later became an ambulance driver for the Red Cross in Europe. It was during the war that she contracted influenza that damaged her lungs and forced her to give up flying in 1920. She went on to a career in architecture, building Spanish style homes in New Mexico to which she had moved for her health. She was eighty-six when she died in Santa Fe in 1977.

The Baker farm occupied 105 acres in west Brighton and has an interesting history of its own. Purchased by Benjamin Baker, it was used to grow feed for the horses he cared for at his livery stable on South Fitzhugh Street in Rochester. Tired of running the business, Baker sold the city property in the 1860s to a man who built a hotel there. Baker turned to raising sheep on the Brighton acres but in 1884 he regained ownership of the Fitzhugh property and erected a theatre there, putting it in his daughter Frances' name.

After Benjamin Baker's death, Frances donated the Brighton farm to the Genesee Valley Park in 1908. Intended for an addition to the golf course, during World War I its use was deferred for a military air field and the name changed from Baker Farm to Baker Field. The United States School of Aerial Photography used Baker Field for its maneuvers until the war's end in 1918.

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