

Who is Pancho Barnes?

Pancho Barnes (1901 - 1975) is considered by many to be one of the 20th century's greatest American characters. During her lifetime, Pancho (born Florence Leontine Lowe) gained respect for her intelligence, individuality, outsized personality, creativity, entrepreneurship, humor, generosity and integrity. A legend in the aviation community, Barnes was one of the first female pilots to be licensed in the United States, and one of the most respected pilots of the Golden Age of Flight. She was also a renowned stunt pilot, performing in several major films of both the silent and sound eras, including Howard Hughes' influential 1930 epic *Hell's Angels*. She later founded one of the first unions in Hollywood, The Associated Motion Picture Pilots' (AMPP). Barnes also holds the distinction of being Lockheed's first female test pilot, and subsequently established several other aviation records. She became the "fastest woman on Earth" on August 4, 1930, when she beat the world's speed record set by flying ace Amelia Earhart.

Barnes is credited with discovering legendary Hollywood glamour photographer George Hurrell (1904 - 1992), who was then eking out a living as a painter and photographer in Laguna Beach, California. She initially hired him only to shoot a photo for her pilot's license application, but loved the photos he took of her - especially the ones that made her look glamorous. To boost Hurrell in his career, Barnes introduced him to all her Hollywood friends. In short time he became the most famous and in-demand photographer in Hollywood.

When Pancho saw a 1927 photograph of Ramon Navarro with her horse, she said, "If George Hurrell can make my horse look as beautiful as the most handsome man in America, then everyone should be using George Hurrell as their photographer!" George Hurrell and Pancho Barnes become lasting friends. In later years, Hurrell frequently regaled his family with stories of his major adventures with Barnes, especially delighting in how he wing-walked on her plane en route to Los Angeles for his first interview with Louis B. Mayer, the head of MGM.

In later years, Barnes gained international fame when she founded the "Happy Bottom Riding Club" at what is now Edwards Air Force Base in California. Club members could fly into her FAA approved airport, attend rodeos at her championship rodeo stadium, ride horses from her well-stocked horse corral, dance in her dance hall, have drinks at her bar, eat the best steak of their life in her restaurant, swim in her large circular pool, and then decide to do it all again the next day by checking into her hotel. Additionally, on her 380 acre ranch, she had a thriving dairy, cattle and hog business. During the height of the Happy Bottom Riding Club's success, there were over 9,000 members worldwide. It was not unusual to find heads of state, high ranking military, actors, actresses, famous writers and artists at her bar and restaurant. At Pancho's, everyone who liked to enjoy life, laugh and have a good time was welcomed. Pancho was fond of saying, "When you have a choice, choose happy!"

Pancho Barnes' extraordinary life and outsized personality have been dramatized as part of the sprawling 1983 classic epic "The Right Stuff" from Tom Wolfe's bestseller, in which stage and film great Kim Stanley portrayed her.

The Pancho Barnes Trust Estate Archive contains thousands of photographs, negatives and letters, as well as film, voice recordings, pilot logs, court and legal papers, depositions, bank checks, master recordings of her songs, and other materials documenting the life and times of Pancho Barnes. As the result of more recent acquisitions, the Archive contains several hundred vintage photographs by famed Hollywood photographer, George Hurrell. The Hurrell holdings span the artist's entire career, from his days as a painter in Laguna Beach, California until his last work on a TV documentary highlighting his career. The Pancho Barnes Trust Estate Archive collection of Hurrell photography was assembled through the acquisition of the famed Chapman Collection and other collections. The Hurrell collection also contains vintage Hurrell photographs and negatives long owned by the Pancho Barnes Trust Estate.

<http://panchobarnes.com>