

Lady Lindy

Amelia Earhart, the First Lady of the Skies

The World War One ace's seasoned hand guided his plane directly toward the two spectators in the clearing. As his plane zeroed in on the potential targets, one of them scrambled out of range. But the other, a plucky twenty-year-old Kansas girl, stood her ground. As she did, a respectful smile likely curled across the pilot's lips to match an impish gleam in his eyes. Eventually, just as she knew he would, the mischievous pilot abruptly pulled up, letting the two young ladies safely enjoy the rest of his bold maneuvers at the 1917 Toronto air show.



"I'm sure he said to himself, 'Watch me make them scamper,'" his pretend target, Amelia Earhart, would later relate. She revealed that she felt surges of both fear and pleasure as the plane swooped toward her at the stunt-flying exhibition. She also said something inside her awakened. "I did not understand it at the time," Amelia reflected, "but I believe that little red airplane said something to me as it swished by."

It would be three more years before she would respond to that little plane's invitation to join the daring pioneers of early aviation. At a December air show in Long Beach, California, Amelia's father plunked down ten dollars for his daughter's brief plane ride with veteran pilot Frank Hawks. Apparently, Hawk's plane spoke the same language to Amelia as the little red one had in Canada. "By the time I got two or three hundred feet off the ground," she confirmed, "I knew I had to fly."

Although it took those two planes to prompt her to take flying lessons, her interest dated back to childhood. She and her younger sister Muriel were inseparable. Amelia and "Pidge," as she had nicknamed Muriel, were not known for being girly girls. Rather than playing with dolls and tea sets, the two preferred climbing trees, collecting bugs and toads, and shooting rats with a rifle.

Their uncle became a coconspirator in their rough-and-tumble play after enjoying a roller coaster ride at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. To provide Amelia with a similar experience, he helped her construct a ramp reaching from the roof of the family's tool shed down to the ground. Her vehicle for this mini thrill-ride was a wooden sled. Following her flight, she emerged from the wood of the broken sled, sporting a ripped dress and a bruised lip. Ignoring these minor issues, she turned to her sister and enthused, "Oh Pidge, it's just like flying!"

Despite her enduring closeness with her sister, Amelia's early years included a considerable amount of instability. Her father, Edwin, tried hard to keep his family together and provide a good living. Year by year, though, he unsuccessfully struggled against the bonds of alcoholism. The family moved around the Midwest, hoping in vain that Edwin would find a permanent job and kick his drinking habit. Although this drifting

lifestyle left Amelia with a strong independent streak, it made it difficult for her to form friendships. One of her high school yearbooks featured a picture of her with the caption, "The girl in brown who walks alone."

Once the flying bug bit that solemn little girl in brown, her life took on a singular focus: soaring through the boundless skies. She managed to accumulate most of the fee required for flying lessons. Her mother also chipped in although she added that it was against her better judgment. With the money in hand, Amelia and her father strode across Kinner Field in Long Beach, California, to meet with celebrated female aviator, Neta Snook. Amelia's request was straight to the point. "I want to fly," she informed the pioneer pilot, "Will you teach me?"

Amelia not only wanted to become a pilot, she planned to look like one as well. First, she had her hair cropped short in the fashion of most female flyers of the day. Then to top off her new look, she purchased a leather flight jacket. Not wanting to appear too much like a novice, she slept in it for three nights to give it a wrinkled and worn look. Six months later, after finishing her lessons, Amelia bought a bright yellow second-hand Kinner Airster biplane, which she christened "The Canary."

The next year, Amelia and her Canary would pierce the clouds to create the first of many milestones to come: a woman's altitude record of 14,000 feet. Unfortunately, just as she was thoroughly enjoying her new passion, she was plagued by severe sinus problems recurring from an earlier case of the Spanish Flu. Despite a string of operations and prolonged periods of convalescence, she was determined to follow the original siren call of that little red airplane.

As if her medical condition wasn't enough to derail her dream, her family's finances ran low and Amelia was forced to sell the Canary. Then, just when her dream seemed to be dissipating, fate stepped in to rejuvenate it. She was working as a social worker in Boston in the spring of 1928, when a coworker told her she had a phone call. Reluctant to answer, since she was extremely busy, she eventually picked up the telephone. Her interest perked up considerably when the voice on the other end asked, "How would you like to be the first woman to fly the Atlantic?" After determining it was not a prank call, she provided the clear-cut answer of "Yes!"

That call would lead to her first appearance on the national stage. The voice on the other end belonged to Captain Hilton Railey, a pilot and publicity wheeler-dealer. Spurred by Lindbergh's flight the previous year, he was organizing a flight across the Atlantic, using two male pilots and a woman. The highly publicized voyage in a Fokker airplane named Friendship left Newfoundland in the summer of 1928, arriving at Burry Point, Wales, 20 hours and 40 minutes later. Even though she hadn't taken control of the plane due to severe weather conditions, the press soon dubbed her "Lady Lindy," a derivative of Lindbergh's "Lucky Lindy" nickname. She told the press that she was actually "just baggage, like a sack of potatoes." "Maybe someday," she smiled and informed reporters, "I'll try it alone."

In the spring of 1932, Amelia not only tried it alone but succeeded. Setting off from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, she headed for Paris. Due to strong icy winds and mechanical problems, she cut the flight short, landing in a pasture north of Derry, Northern Ireland. Even though it was not her original, destination, it was across the

Atlantic nevertheless. “After scaring the cows in the neighborhood,” she would later report, “I pulled up in a farmer’s backyard.” When that farmer and his friend walked toward her asking if she had flown far, Amelia grinned and replied, “From America.”

As she continued to raise bars for aviators, she also raised hopes for hundreds of thousands of young girls. Amelia’s likable Midwestern personality and irrepressible optimism transformed the previously solemn “girl in brown” into an example of the boundless future that might await them. Sadly, Amelia’s tragic last flight has overshadowed the happier visions of the plucky girl from Kansas who became known to the world as Lady Lindy. Those visions still fly high though in the memories of millions of fans she inspired.

What do you think?

- Did reading about the achievements of Amelia Earhart or other famous aviators like Charles Lindbergh and Howard Hughes make you want to learn to fly?
- What’s your memory of your first time in an airplane? Where were you flying to?
- Would you have stood your ground as young Amelia did if an air show pilot swooped down toward you?
- What do you think the Irish farmer thought when he saw Amelia’s plane landing in his pasture?
- Have you ever been to an air show? What was your favorite performance?

Timeline of Amelia Earhart

- **July 24, 1897:** Amelia Mary Earhart is born in Atchison, Kansas.
- **1908:** Earhart sees an airplane for the first time at the Iowa State Fair.
- **June 1916:** Earhart graduates from Hyde Park High School in Chicago.
- **1920:** Earhart attends an air show on Long Beach with her father. With pilot Frank Hawk, she takes her first ride in an airplane.
- **January 3, 1921:** Earhart has her first flying lesson with pilot Neta Snook.
- **July 1921:** Earhart buys her first plane, the Kinner Airster (named “The Canary”).
- **October 22, 1922:** Earhart breaks the women’s altitude record at 14,000 feet.
- **June 17-18, 1928:** Earhart becomes the first woman to fly across the Atlantic.
- **1929:** Earhart helps found The Ninety-Nines, Inc., the first organization for women aviators.
- **1932:** Earhart becomes the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic.
- **1935:** Earhart becomes the first person to fly solo from LA to Mexico City.
- **1937:** Amelia disappears during a flight around the world.

The Four-Dollar Future

*A paltry investment that would buy rock & roll immortality for **Elvis Presley***

When most people invest in their future, they have to dig deep into their pockets. Doctors spend years paying off their medical school loans. Entrepreneurs lay out thousands of dollars of "seed money" to start up their dream businesses. Elvis Aaron Presley, by comparison, got off pretty cheaply. He managed to purchase a glittering future that would turn many successful doctors and entrepreneurs bright green with envy—and he bought it for only four bucks.

Elvis happened upon this super-deal in the summer of 1953 at 706 Union Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee. A sign in the little Sun Records studio there advertised its sideline, the "Memphis Recording Service." The sign read: "We record anything—anywhere—anytime." As the words beckoned him, the youngster debated whether to shell out his hard-earned money.

Oh, why not, Elvis thought. After all, when he was a kid, he had won second place, singing in a talent contest at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show. Some of his fellow high school students had also praised his performance in the school's variety show. Of course, there was also Miss Marmann, his high school music teacher. She had given him a C and told him he "couldn't sing." But what the heck; it was only four bucks! As the eighteen-year-old Crown Electric truck driver plunked down the four-dollar fee, he had no inkling of what it would eventually buy him.

Elvis just thought that a record might make a good gift for his mother, Gladys. For his four-dollar debut, he chose the Ink Spots' "My Happiness" and backed it with a country song called "That's When Your Heartaches Begin." After he had finished and played it back, Elvis was disappointed with the way he sounded. But knowing how mothers are, he thought she would probably like it. Anyway, it was no big deal. He had only recorded it on a whim, and he would probably never stop by Sun Records again.

Someone else in the studio, though, wasn't disappointed with the sound of the record. The office manager was a woman named Marion Keisker, who admired Elvis's singing and jotted down Presley's address, a neighbor's phone number, and the comment: "Elvis Presley. Good ballad singer. Hold." Studio owner Sam Phillips wasn't in the studio, but when he returned, Keisker told him about Elvis and suggested he call him in to audition. Phillips agreed but kept putting it off.

Fortunately for music history, Keisker kept on him until he contacted Elvis through his neighbor since the Presleys didn't have a phone at the time. When the young truck driver came in and sang a few songs during a brief audition, not only did Keisker again admire his talent, but Phillips promised to contact him for some studio work. It was beginning to look as if Miss Marmann might have been mistaken.

True to his promise, Sam Phillips called Elvis in for a trial recording session in April of 1954. Elvis gave it his best shot with a newly written tune, "Without You," but it simply didn't click. Phillips, though, was again impressed with his voice and suggested Elvis experiment with other types of material. As Presley ran through gospel, country, rhythm and blues, and popular ballads, Phillips detected his raw potential. He suggested Elvis begin rehearsing with other musicians.

Phillips contacted two members of Doug Poindexter's Starlight Wranglers, a local band that had recently cut a record at Sun Studio. During the next three months, guitarist Scotty Moore, and bass player Bill Black rehearsed with Elvis at Scotty's house. Then on July 5th, Phillips called them into the studio for a recording session.

It was during that session, as many books and documentary films have noted, that "The King" was truly born. As with his preceding session, Elvis didn't sparkle with the first few songs he tried. It wasn't until the tired trio took a break that rock & roll lightning struck. Elvis began fooling around with an uptempo version of a blues song called "That's All Right."

Suddenly, the "fooling around" turned a little more serious as Bill began to furnish a bass accompaniment. Then Scotty added some lead guitar licks. As they jammed with the unusual selection, something sparked across Sam Phillips' memory. He had previously believed that the heartfelt rhythm and blues of the black community could have widespread commercial appeal. But he knew the racial tensions of the times would never allow that. Now, right in front of him, he saw someone who could tap into the raw emotion of the lively black music and who was, of all things, white.

During the session, they recorded "I Love You Because," a fast-tempo "Blue Moon of Kentucky," and the song that would soon make musical waves across the South, "That's All Right." Those waves would begin two days later when Memphis disc jockey Dewey Phillips played the new tune on his Red Hot and Blue program. Before the needle left the record, the lights on his phone lines began to flash. His listening audience wasn't exactly sure what they had just heard, but they knew they wanted more.

It wouldn't be long before the whole nation wanted more. But there was a problem—this new "white black" music didn't fit into any existing category. No one knew quite how to market it. At first, Elvis was billed as a country singer, with titles like the "King of Western Bop" and the "Hillbilly Cat." He found some success on country radio programs like the Louisiana Hayride. But many country fans felt he had strayed too far from mainstream country music. According to recollections, after Elvis's legendary cool reception on the Grand Ole Opry in October of 1954, the show's talent booker Jim Denny, suggested Elvis take up truck driving again.

As rock and roll history is acutely aware, he didn't. Under the guidance of the now-controversial Colonel Tom Parker, a former carnival huckster who had once managed "dancing chickens," Elvis was soon transformed into a living legend. From the youthful energy of "Heartbreak Hotel," "Hound Dog," and "Don't Be Cruel," to the mature sounds of "Suspicious Minds," "In the Ghetto," and "An American Trilogy," he paved a one-of-a-kind highway to superstardom.

His tumultuous journey would lead him from a two-room shack in Tupelo, Mississippi, to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. His voice would eventually be pressed into over a billion records. His image would become the third most reproduced in the world, right behind Jesus and Mickey Mouse. Even Miss Marmann would have to agree: that's not a bad four dollars' worth.

What do you think?

- Do you think Elvis would have become famous even if he hadn't made that four dollar record?
- Was Colonel Tom Parker good for Elvis or bad?
- Have you ever been to Elvis's home Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee? What did you think of it?
- Did you ever meet a famous singer? If so, who?
- What is your favorite Elvis Presley song?

Timeline of Elvis Presley

- **January 8, 1935:** Elvis Aaron Presley is born in Tupelo, Mississippi.
- **1946:** Elvis gets his first guitar on his 11th birthday.
- **1948:** The Presleys move to Memphis, Tennessee.
- **1953:** Elvis performs for the first time at Sun Records.
- **Summer 1954:** His first single goes wild.
- **1955:** Elvis signs a management contract with Hank Snow Attractions.
- **1956:** Elvis' first RCA single, "Heartbreak Hotel," is released.
- **1957:** Elvis buys Graceland Mansion.
- **1958:** Elvis is drafted into the U.S. Army and posted to Germany.
- **1960:** Elvis is discharged from the army.
- **1961:** "Can't Help Falling in Love" is released and featured in Presley's 1961 film *Blue Hawaii*.
- **May 1, 1967:** Elvis marries Priscilla Beaulieu.
- **1968:** Elvis appears on an NBC television special that becomes widely known as "The '68 Comeback Special."
- **1969:** Elvis returns to live performances at the International Hotel in Las Vegas.
- **1972:** Elvis and Priscilla separate. Their divorce is finalized a year later.
- **1973:** Elvis makes television and entertainment history with his concert *Elvis: Aloha from Hawaii via Satellite*, broadcasted live to audiences around the world.
- **June 26, 1977:** Elvis makes his last concert appearance in Indianapolis, Indiana.
- **August 16, 1977:** Elvis Presley passes away at Graceland.