

Historic Race Through St. Simons Sunshine

A 1950s Junior Chamber of Commerce scrapbook in the collection of the Coastal Georgia Historical Society reveals an interesting connection between the first annual Sunshine Festival on St. Simons Island and a significant event in the history of women's aviation: the first women's over-water International Air Race from Washington, D.C. to Havana, Cuba in 1955. Thirty-six airplanes entered the "capital to capital" event. More than 60 women aviators took off from Washington National Airport on June 10, after a rain delay. The race included a compulsory check-in at today's St. Simons Island Airport, as well as Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

It was a happy coincidence that the women were scheduled to fly into St. Simons during an event that would become a community tradition, now associated with the Fourth of July. The 1955 Sunshine Festival was sponsored by the Junior Chamber of Commerce, or the Jaycees. In addition to acting as plane spotters, local



Jaycees organized hospitality and services for the aviators, some of whom stayed overnight. Among other items about the Festival, the scrapbook includes an August 11, 1955, letter of thanks from one of the pilots, who wrote, "We completely fell in love with your island and hope to be able to return in the future for a vacation when we would have more time to enjoy it fully."

The Air Race was sponsored by the Ninety-Nines, an international organization of women pilots established in 1929, with Amelia Earhart as the first president.

Named for the ninety-nine charter members, its purpose was to coordinate the interests and efforts of women in the aviation field, including service during times of war.

In 1941, with World War II threatening, the Ninety-Nines wrote to President Franklin Roosevelt offering to assist in the war effort. Ninety-Nines member Jacqueline Cochran became the first director of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), which drew heavily from Ninety-Nines membership to help train male pilots and to ferry aircraft

from factory to base. After the war, the Ninety-Nines continued to support women as professional pilots and aviation industry leaders, and today the organization has members throughout the world.

This month's image is a photograph from the scrapbook showing the plane of Nancy Moore, chairman of the Washington, D.C. Ninety-Nines, during her stop here in June 1955. In front of the plane is local resident Ardelia Reese. The scrapbook was generously donated to the Society by Bill Strother, Jr., whose father was president of the organization that year.