

Colanthe “Florence” Jones Murphy

Born: December 13, 1911, Fernley, Nev.

Died: January 23, 2006, Las Vegas, Nev.

Maiden Name: Jones

Ethnicity: Caucasian

Married: John Maurice Murphy

Children: Margaret Lynne Murphy, 3 grandchildren

Primary City/County of residence/work:
Las Vegas, Clark County

Major fields of work: Aviation, Politics, Real Estate

Other role identities: mother, businesswoman, club member/organizer



Colanthe “Florence” Jones Murphy

Photo courtesy UNLV Special Collections

Pioneer aviator, airline owner broke female stereotypes

Florence J. Murphy was a pioneer aviator in Nevada’s fledgling airline industry; a woman who broke several glass ceilings in the industry and became known worldwide.

Born Colanthe Jones on December 13, 1911, in Fernley, Nev., to Benjamin F. Jones and Lola R. Bair, she reportedly was fond of a favorite relative or family friend’s name, Florence, and started calling herself Florence as soon as she could. She had one sister and five brothers, and from an early age declared to anyone who would listen that she could do anything they could. She proved it in her life.

Her family moved to Winnemucca when she was young, where she received her schooling. She also lettered in basketball and was an office holder in clubs.

She became a teacher and furthered her education at the University of Nevada at Reno in 1929. She was certified as a special education teacher and worked as a school nurse in McGill, Nev. She met John Murphy in college. In a move that caught her Winnemucca friends by surprise, Florence married him in a double ceremony, with Frances Otis and Oscar Reinhard, in Reno in 1930. In his job as an engineer for the state highway department, he was transferred to Las Vegas in 1936. She found work there first as a legal secretary.

Shortly after their arrival in the south, a barnstormer in a Piper J-3 Cub took the couple up for a ride. Halfway through, he let go of the plane's control stick, and told Florence that it was all hers. She and John got hooked right away, and both worked hard earning their required coursework and 250 hours of flying time in order to become pilots. She did her first solo flight on May 17, 1940. She joined the Los Angeles chapter of the "Ninety-Nines," an international organization of female pilots. She would perform at air shows and take friends up for rides. At the time, she was one of only two female pilots in Las Vegas. In 1944, she got licensed as a flight instructor, and as a commercial pilot.

In 1941, with World War II heating up, the military commandeered Western Airfield to become the Las Vegas Army Air Corps Gunnery School for the U.S. Army, later changed to Nellis Air Force Base, so commercial and private pilots needed another place to land and store their planes. Her husband and his partner Bud Barrett bought 200 acres on the old Tonopah Highway to build a new field, christened Sky Haven Airport, later known as North Las Vegas Airport. They had a big airshow planned for the grand opening ceremonies and were honored and surprised when an Army monoplane showed up. But the celebration stopped because the pilot was there to tell them that Pearl Harbor had just been bombed, and all U.S. flying was being grounded.

John Murphy and Bud Barrett left soon thereafter to volunteer as flight instructors for the military air base in Wickenburg, Arizona, leaving the daily operation of the new airport to Florence, making her the first woman in the U.S. to co-own, co-build, and run a commercial airport.

She wanted to do more for her country during the war, so she applied to be in the WASPS, or Women Airforce Service Pilots, a civilian women pilots' organization for testing aircraft, ferrying aircraft, and training pilots, to free male pilots up for combat roles. She completed all the preparations, leaving her young daughter with family in Winnemucca. After her tearful good-bye phone call to her, she decided she couldn't leave her child and rescinded her application. She continued on as a flight instructor and expanded her involvement in the aviation business. She served as Aviation Chairman of the Nevada Federation of Women's Clubs.

When they returned, her husband and his partner became very involved in the young Bonanza Airlines, which was growing as a regional carrier to connect Northern and Southern Nevada. Florence also joined the company, rising to the position of Vice President, handling administrative and personnel affairs.

She continued to fly at times, flying incognito as the pilot of a commercial flight. She and the company were concerned that the passengers would not be comfortable with a female pilot. She also instructed many future pilots, some of whom cowered when she ordered them into a tailspin to pull out of, saying in an interview that one grabbed her by the throat, trying to get onto her lap, and another got sick and swore he'd never fly again. Yet she still claimed that overall men were easier to instruct than women.

In early 1948, she was part of a Bonanza Airlines contingent visiting Reno, and was a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Charlie Mapes, at his then-new hotel in downtown Reno.

In March 1948, she was honored by the *Las Vegas Review Journal* as the "Woman of the Week," for being the "best known pilot of Las Vegas."

She resigned from day-to-day duties at Bonanza Airlines but remained a director and served as secretary-treasurer and advisor for ten years, during which time she divorced her husband. She became active in Republican politics, being nominated to the state assembly but never winning. She joined the Las Vegas Business and Professional Women's Club, becoming its president and state finance chair. She was a delegate to the Republican National Convention in San Francisco in 1956. That year she was also the Nevada co-chairman of the Citizens for Eisenhower Committee, which involved trips to Washington D.C.

In 1957, she was elected, as the first female, to the post of Vice President of the Airlines Personnel Relations Conference, a subdivision of the Air Transport Association of America, which included carriers from around the world. As the only woman among 70 members, she later said in interviews that she could feel the resentment toward her.

Murphy was also interested in Nevada History, organizing a Southern Nevada Historical Society for the purpose of building a museum in Las Vegas and returning Nevada historical treasures to the state from California, Utah, and Arizona.

The year 1958 marked an acrimonious period for her and Bonanza Airlines. She sued her boss, company president Edmund Converse, for \$271,000 in damages for "great humiliation and mental anguish" after being stripped of her authority at the company. Converse responded by firing her, with the full support of Bonanza's board of directors.



The principals of Bonanza Airlines, circa 1930s to 1940s.

Photo Courtesy of UNLV, Special Collections
from the Betty Ham Dokter Photographs.

She considered that her aviation retirement and studied real estate before joining with another pilot in a real estate company in Las Vegas, a business she stayed in for the rest of her life.

Florence was a strong woman in the man's world of early aviation. She died in Las Vegas on January 23, 2006, at the age of 94. She is buried at Bunkers Memory Gardens Memorial Park. Five years after her death, she was enshrined in the Nevada Aerospace Hall of Fame.



Florence Murphy receiving an Easter Seals donation from Georgia Butterfield, 1950s.

Photo Courtesy UNLV, Special Collections, Hannah-Butterfield Collection.

Researched by Patti Bernard and written by Kitty Falcone.

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