Amelia Earhart

We remember Amelia Earhart today more for her disappearance than for her accomplishments. One of several early female aviators, Earhart was a symbol for women breaking the gender barrier in the air. She drew courage and a desire for adventure growing up in Atchison, where the home of her grandparents was perched on a bluff high above the Missouri River.

As a girl Earhart enjoyed thrills like sledding down the hills in Atchison. When she and her sister tried to replicate a roller coaster ride they had seen at the World’s Fair, she said it felt just like flying.

Earhart took her first airplane ride during World War I. “I think I’d like to fly,” she told her family. She began lessons and quickly purchased her own airplane, which she used to break women’s altitude records. On the heels of Charles Lindbergh’s successful flight across the
Atlantic Ocean, she was selected to be the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, albeit as a passenger. She accepted the offer for the chance to write and promote a book of her adventures. A tall woman for her day at five feet, eight inches, Earhart's tousled hair and friendly smile reminded people of Lindbergh, and they called her Lady Lindy. Earhart married her publisher, then set out to demonstrate her abilities on a solo flight across the Atlantic, the first woman to do so.

“My flight didn’t mean anything to aviation,” she said on her lecture circuit. “But if it interested women in flying as passengers or pilots or letting their families fly, then I feel my flight was worthwhile.”

Earhart continued to set records; she endorsed clothing and luggage, and helped form an organization of 99 women pilots. As an airline company representative, she toured the nation promoting the fun and safety of flying, several times she addressed Kansas audiences.

“Air travel is just the most modern means of transportation, and the
most efficient. It is coming much faster than we realize.”

Earhart began planning for the most dangerous flight of her life in her first two-engine plane. She was the first to attempt the 29,000-mile route to circle the globe at the equator. She and her navigator, Fred Noonan, completed three-quarters of the route. On July 2, 1937, they began the longest leg of the flight to a tiny island in the middle of the Pacific. They were looking forward to the flight’s conclusion that would end with a celebration in California on the Fourth of July.

When Earhart failed to pinpoint Howland Island she radioed a U.S. Coast Guard cutter. She didn’t receive their responses. The U.S. conducted a massive search that lasted two weeks but failed to recover the aviators. Their disappearance became one of the century’s major mysteries. Theories and speculations continue to this day, making Earhart among the most well-known Kansans in the world.
Earhart’s birthplace in Atchison is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and open to the public as a museum where visitors can glimpse the same view that once inspired her.