



Courtesy Photo
The Wright 1909 Military Flyer is the plane that Wilbur Wright piloted and on which Dixon native Sarah Van Deman was the first woman passenger.

Dixon woman first female plane passenger in US in 1909

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VACAVILLE — The plane carrying the first woman to fly in the Western Hemisphere didn't even succeed in getting off the ground at College Park, Maryland, on its first attempt in 1909.

"A little scream was subdued when the biplane struck the earth at the end of the monorail and failed to lift into the air," wrote local aviation historian David Trojan.

The pilot, Wilbur Wright, simply told Dixon native Sarah Van Deman to stay seated while the Wright 1909 Military Flyer was wheeled back by nine soldiers to a starting derrick to try again.

The second launch was much more successful, lasting about 4 minutes, reaching about 60 mph and the height of about 60 feet while circling around the airfield twice with the early morning crowd cheering.

Thus Deman made her mark in aviation history Oct. 27, 1909, and, 109 years later, Trojan recorded it as one of a collection of tales he has written about Solano County's role in aviation history.



VANDEMAN

"Technically, it was also the first crash involving a female in the United States," Trojan said.

Trojan is a longtime aviation archeologist and researcher who has worked as a volunteer at the Travis Heritage Center and the Vacaville Heritage Council for years.

He is a retired Navy aviation electronics technician whose Air Force officer wife is assigned to Travis Air Force Base. He has researched and tracked down military aircraft crash sites since he was living in Hawaii and came across the forgotten wreckage of a World War II-era B-24 bomber.

Trojan has logged hundreds

of hours uncovering the history behind a host of crash sites around the country, how they occurred and the military people involved in them.

Deman's story first surfaced for him while he was researching the 1955 crash of a Navy FJ-2 Fury jet fighter near Dixon.

A conversation with a Dixon librarian unearthed part of Deman's tale, which Trojan fled away for when he had time. A springtime trip to Ohio to research the Wright brothers resparked his interest in Deman.

He dove into finding more about Deman and was rewarded with more information that included "a gem of an article" in the Oct. 28, 1909, San Francisco Call newspaper, a book she wrote about her travels to Africa and a 1960 interview with her in a Monterey newspaper.

According to Trojan's research, Deman was born Sadie McCune Rice in 1880 in Dixon. She married Army Capt. Ralph Deman in 1903.

After a stint in the Philippines, the couple moved to Washington, D.C. in 1905 and became aeronautical enthusi-

asts, visiting the flying fields at Fort Myer and College Park frequently, according to Trojan.

Deman became friends with Katherine Wright, the sister of Orville and Wilbur Wright, who was the first woman to fly in an airplane Feb. 15, 1909, in Pau, France, for just more than 7 minutes with Wilbur Wright at the controls.

That friendship helped Deman get to the front of the line of a host of military and Washington political figures' wives who were vying with each other to be the first woman in the U.S. to fly. "They tried to keep it secret," said Trojan of the initial 7:30 a.m. flight. "They planned this in advance, to get the first flight of the day."

After Wright explained how the aircraft worked, Deman climbed up to the passenger's seat. Wright and a soldier tied a rope around the bottom of Deman's skirt to keep it down and she wrapped a veil around her hair and hat to keep it in place.

Deman later described the flight to a Call reporter as "simply grand" with an engine

Plane: Flown by one of the Wright bros.

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“that was spittin’ and makin’ the doggonest noise”

“Now I understand why birds sing when they can fly through the air. It is simply ideal. There was no reason to fear. I did not even think of how long that I was up, except that I knew the time was too short,” Deman told the Call reporter.

When asked what he thought of the flight, Capt. Deman said he wanted to thank Wright because

“now it will be possible to have peace in our home!”

Deman continued her appetite for adventure with trips to Africa in the 1920s. She outlived her first husband and her second, a Navy commander named Lang. Sarah McCune Lang died in Monterey in 1967, at 86, and is buried in the Dixon Cemetery.

Of his research, Trojan said, “I did this as a gift to the people to show that there is all this hidden history that people don’t know about.”

One copy of his collection of local aviation history will be made available for examination in the near future at the Vacaville Heritage Council at 618 E. Main St.

and at the Dixon historical archives “for the people of Dixon to be proud of.”

The collection also includes accounts of other pieces of aviation history from the B-29 bomber crash that killed Brig. Gen. Robert Travis to research into the county’s now-vanished network of

small airfields, such as one located between Fairfield and Rio Vista that was a stop for air mail aircraft before World War II.

Trojan also gives aviation talks before different groups and museums.

Trojan’s next one will take place at 2 p.m. Feb. 2 at the Western Railway Museum, during which he will examine unusual train wrecks related to aircraft wrecks. It will include rare historical photos.