



PANCHO BARNES:

The Woman, the Myth, the Legacy

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Prepared by the Cultural Resources Department, EAFB

Florence “Pancho” Lowe Barnes was born in Southern California on July 29, 1901 into a family of wealth and privilege. Her maternal grandfather was renowned builder R. J. Dobbins who left the family an immense estate in real estate holdings when he died in 1893. Her paternal grandfather was Thaddeus S.C. Lowe, a man who gained fame in the Civil War Balloon Corps and fueled Pancho’s love of aviation. He also founded the California Institute of Technology and was responsible for the building of the Mount Lowe Incline Railroad in the San Gabriel Mountains of Southern California, the only overhead electric trolley railroad in the United States.

Although firmly entrenched in “high society”, Florence preferred being outside, riding horses and tagging along with her grandfather to air shows or with her father to fish and hunt.



Young Pancho, circled in red, from
<http://mountlowe.altadenahistoricalsociety.org/florence-pancho-barnes/>



Pancho on her wedding day with Rev. Barnes.

From

<https://www.legendofpanchobarnes.com/index.php/337-chimes-for-st-james-episcopal-church>

Being raised in a 32-room mansion with her own private butler and invitations to the best society events did not make Pancho a “proper” lady. Probably to curb her daughter’s very unfeminine behavior and quiet society gossips, Pancho’s mother arranged a marriage to the Reverend Ranklin Barnes when Pancho was 20 years old. The two were ill-suited, with different priorities and interest. Pancho did have one child in 1921, within her first year of marriage. His name was William (Billy) Emmert Barnes. Being a housewife and mother did not fulfill Pancho as many had hoped. Instead, she found an interest in the emerging movie business. Pancho also joined the Flintridge Riding Club where General George Patton was a member and competed in local horse shows. She raised and trained animals for films, was a stunt woman and photographer, and script writer. Pancho loved the excitement of the movie industry, as much as she enjoyed the new friends she was making.

However, in 1923 Pancho’s life took a turn when her mother passed away suddenly, and her father quickly remarried. Pancho’s cure for the sadness that affected her health was to ignore the bed rest ordered by doctors and return to an active life with more adventures – supplemented by her inheritance.

In 1927, partially to escape the indignity she was causing her husband due to an affair, she took a cruise to South America and upon her return she gave up the illusion of being a married woman. During a party she threw at her Laguna Beach home Pancho and some friends agreed to sign up to crew a banana boat headed to South America. She dressed as a man and called herself Jacob Crane. The banana boat was, in fact, carrying weapons to Mexican Revolutionaries and the crew became prisoners on the boat. Eventually escaping with a fellow crew mate, Roger Chute, they wandered across the war-torn Mexican countryside on burros. When Roger commented that she looked like Don Quito's side-kick "Pancho", she corrected him that the name was Sancho but decided she liked the name – and Pancho Barnes was born.

Returning to California in 1928 she was ready to fully realize her new identity.



Courtesy Pancho Barnes Enterprises

Photo from <http://legendofpanchobarnes.com/index.php/about-the-film/synopsis/21-main-content/static-pages/138-back-in-the-saddle-the-story-of-pancho-barnes>



Courtesy Pancho Barnes Enterprises

Pancho with her Travel Air Model R "Mystery Ship" plane. From <http://legendofpanchobarnes.com/index.php/about-the-film/synopsis/21-main-content/static-pages/138-back-in-the-saddle-the-story-of-pancho-barnes>

After arriving back in California Pancho took up residence in her family home in San Marino with her son. She had always loved aviation and with her inheritance decided it was time to learn to fly. Her teacher was veteran WWI pilot Ben Caitlin, who unsuccessfully tried to discourage her. What he discovered was that Pancho was a natural pilot. In 1930 she won a speed race that gave her the title of the fastest woman on earth. She began stunt flying for the movies and organized the Association of Motion Picture Pilots union, encouraging stunt pilots to go on strike in 1932 for better safety and higher pay. Along with Bobbi Trout, Pancho started the Woman's Air Reserves, to support woman pilots and change the public's mind about usability of women as pilots.

Living well on her inheritance, Pancho's life took another turn when the depression hit. She sold her beloved "Mystery Ship" in 1935 and shockingly traded an apartment complex on Sunset Boulevard for 80-acres of isolated desert land in the Antelope Valley.

When Pancho acquired the ranch in 1935 she had already seen the property from the air. She christened the ranch Rancho Oro Verde and she moved in with her son, Billy, her horses, and her friend Blackie. Located between Rosamond and Rogers (than Muroc) dry lakes, the ranch was about 6 miles southwest of the town of Muroc and 13 miles from the newly established East Camp (Muroc Bombing and Gunnery Range) on the northeast side of Rodgers Dry Lake. Pancho thrived at farming and added more livestock and a dairy to her assets, eventually adding a restaurant to entertain the pilots with the Army Air Force who frequently held maneuvers on the lakebed. Despite the harsh environment and distance from all the luxuries she grew up with, Pancho made a success out of her patch of land. A swimming pool with a ramp to allow horses to enter the pool, rodeo grounds, hotel for guests, many coming in from Hollywood, and, of course, an airstrip rounded out the improvements that became the Happy Bottom Riding Club. She started the Civilian Pilot Training program (through Antelope Valley College) to teach flying and, despite women not being allowed to enroll in the class, Pancho graduated two women from her own program before the class was terminated due to WWII.

Pancho's hospitality, her many friends in the motion picture and aviation industry, and her love of life made Rancho Del Oro a favorite place to visit, to stay, to film at, and to just relax. Military men from East Camp, looking for relief from the loneliness and isolation of this remote desert camp found a home away from home at Pancho's.



Billy Barnes, left, Pancho, right, and Pancho's then boyfriend, Granny , ca 1936. From <https://www.legendofpanchobarnes.com/index.php/288-son-of-a-legend>

In 1941, when much of East Camp moved to South Base, and the US entered WWII, the small installation came to life with new activity. As Rancho Del Oro had the only hanger around until 1942, the military rented it. Pancho supported the war effort with food supplies from her dairy, fields, and livestock, as well as providing a place for the men to come and ride horses, party, swim and decompress from the stress of war. The new planes and super-sonic tests fueled Pancho's interest while the pilots enjoyed rubbing elbows with Pancho's frequent Hollywood visitors. After WWII, the Cold War started and the small installation continued to grow and with it the accommodations at Pancho's place, the Happy Bottom Riding Club. It was, for the most part, a happy and symbiotic relationship between the ranch and the installation.



Images from
<https://happybottomridingclub.com/>



One of Pancho's closest friends was Chuck Yeager, who served as best man at her fourth wedding in 1952, with the commanding officer, Gen Boyd, giving the bride away. However, General J. Stanley Holtoner replaced the more tolerant Boyd and he forbid enlisted men to go to Pancho's and even requested the FBI launch an investigation into Pancho's establishment, suggesting it was being used as a brothel, a charge which the FBI found no proof of. Shortly after the air force sought to expand its boundaries, right through Pancho's place. She fought the Air Force in court, and although she eventually lost the case, she did manage to get nearly twice as much for the property as the Air Force initially offered. In 1953, right after the ruling, there was a mysterious explosion at the ranch and the resulting fire destroyed many of the main buildings. Rumors swirled but the cause of the explosion was never resolved. Pancho's beloved ranch was lost to fire and her land gone to the Air Force.



The Pool in happier times. From <https://happybottomridingclub.com/>



Aerial view of Pancho's today with a few featured highlighted

Pancho moved to Cantil and although she had dreams to reestablish her club it was never realized. She and her husband divorced in 1958 and Pancho died alone in her cabin in the desert she loved in 1975. In the last few years before her death Pancho became a welcome guest at installation events and a respected speaker on the early years of Edwards Air Force Base. Her son, Billy, even managed to locate her old plane, the Mystery Ship, and bought it for her, although she never flew it again. Her Fly-In hotel, not damaged in the fire in 1953, was moved and is still in use as apartments in North Edwards. The non-working fountain still remains at what was the Happy Bottom Riding Club.

The base had celebrated Pancho in recent years with an annual barbecue at the remains of her ranch. It was decided that the event was causing too many impacts to the site and now all visitors are required to go through the history office if they want to visit. Since the ranch is located within the small arms range, it is strongly recommended that any curiosity seekers follow protocol and inquire at the museum, both for their safety and to help preserve what remains of the Happy Bottom Riding Club.



1928 photo of Pancho Barnes taken by George Hurrell, one of her favorites, that was hung in the bar at the Happy Bottom Riding Club. From <https://happybottomridingclub.com/>