

James Banning

Handout #4

James Banning was the first African American to fly across the United States. He was the chief pilot of the Bessie Coleman Aero Club and earned a license through the U.S. Commerce Department in 1927, the first year they were issued. Banning initially learned to fly from an old army aviator who gave him private lessons, at the Richard Fisher Flying Field in Des Moines, Iowa in 1922. Once he learned to fly, he returned home to Ames Iowa to open an auto repair shop where he would also fix broken planes. Banning worked in Ames until 1928 when he was eventually able to build his own plane, *Miss Ames*. The trailblazing pilot earlier had become the first African American to earn a U. S, Department of Commerce pilot's license in 1927 (#1324), months before the first Black pilot, Emery Malick. In 1929, like many Black aviators, the licensed pilot moved to Los Angeles. There, he became the Chief Pilot of the Bessie Coleman Aero Club. The club, created in memory of The U. S.'s first African American female pilot, encouraged Black men and women to become aviators and trained them to flying in honor of Coleman's accomplishments.

In Los Angeles, Banning would barnstorm with his plane and with his "Flying Hoboes." They would fly in air circuses, entertaining the cheering throngs below. To earn needed cash, he flew politicians around during their campaigns. In 1930, he even flew the first African American to serve in Congress since Reconstruction, Oscar De Priest, R-IL over South Los Angeles.

Banning and his copilot, Thomas C. Allen, decided to pursue a \$1,000 challenge to become the first African Americans to fly across the U.S., coast to coast. The two aviators knew they could not fly directly across the U.S. without stopping in their older plane to refuel, periodically fix, and to raise money as they went. They realized the flight would be extremely arduous with their old rickety plane, but the accomplishment would bring much fame.

The cross-country feat had been accomplished before but not by black aviators. It was first done by Calbraith Perry Rogers in 1911. Rogers came from a long line of U. S Navy commodores, including War of 1812 hero, his great grandfather, Oliver Hazard Perry, and his great granduncle Matthew C. Perry who had opened Japan up to the U.S. and the West in 1853. Rogers had accepted a challenge from publisher William Randolph Hearst who offered the Hearst prize, US \$50,000 (\$1,454,000 today) to the first aviator to fly coast to coast within 30 days. Rogers

took his plane, *Van Fiz*, named after his sponsor's popular soft drink, on the journey. He flew *Van Fiz* along railroad tracks with a repair and supply train following below. After dozens of intentional stops, along with many crashes, he made the cross-continent flight in 49 days, but well past the 30 required days, needed to collect the prize.

The first nonstop flight across the U.S. took place in 1923. U.S. Army pilots, John A. Macready and Oakley Kelly flew across the U.S., nonstop in only 27 hours. Four years later, in May 1927, Charles Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic Ocean in a solo, nonstop flight from New York City to Paris in 33 hours. Five months before Banning and Allen's transcontinental flight, and five years after Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic. She had a shorter flight than Lindbergh from Newfoundland to Derry, Northern Ireland, but she completed the journey in a remarkable 15 hours.

During Banning's 1932 flight across the nation, he and Allen had to raise money at his many stops. Allen bought into the adventure for \$200 (\$4,346.15 today). Furthermore, Allen proposed a brilliant idea to fund the adventure. At each stop, they would ask for small donations. The donations would be used for gas, a warm meal, or a place to sleep. The donors would then inscribe their names on the wing of the plane and their names would be part of history. Twenty-four communities contributed and 69 people inscribed their names on the wings.

The two soon began to attract public attention. They were nicknamed "the suntanned editions of Lindy. (Charles Lindbergh)" Once in Pittsburgh, they were able to get the Franklin D. Roosevelt presidential campaign to sponsor them, as long as they dropped 15,000 "Roosevelt for President" leaflets along the way throughout Pennsylvania. After traversing the nation in 21 days, they flew over New York City, circled the Statue of Liberty, and landed in Valley Stream Airport, on Long Island.

Banning was a hero and inspired many African Americans to consider aviation. The Bessie Coleman Aero Club promoted more Blacks in aviation and their Chief Pilot had just made history. Regrettably though, Banning would not be able to personally promote aviation to African American men and woman. Three and half months after his courageous flight, on February 5, 1933, Banning was killed while flying. Once back in Los Angeles, he looked to rent an airplane so he could participate in a San Diego airshow. Although a hero with national acclaim, they refused to rent him a plane because he was black. A disappointed Banning chose to

still attend the airshow, but as a passenger, not as a pilot. He sat in the front seat of the biplane, while a young white Navy pilot took the controls in the seat behind him. At the show, the pilot brought the plane into a steep climb and the engine stalled. The young man could not regain control and the two fell from the sky, colliding with the ground to their deaths on impact.

Despite the keen obstacles of early 20th century racism in America, Banning rose above the artificial limits placed upon him. He achieved his goals and served as a model for many aviators who followed, especially those from the Bessie Coleman Aero Club.