

Villagers remember aviation icon, neighbor Betty Skelton

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By Tatiana Quiroga

Behind the sweet, calm exterior of late Villager Betty Skelton was a daredevil who shattered records on land and in the air.

With today as National Aviation Day, Villagers who knew Skelton, or Betty Skelton Erde, as she is known to others, recently reflected on the character and the accomplishments of a particular aviator they can simply never forget.

"You would never know that she did any of the things that she did," said Andrea Spanierman, Village of Amelia resident and former neighbor of Skelton. "She had a very low, quiet voice. She was not at all over the top."

Despite that humble demeanor, Skelton's list of achievements is lengthy.

- International championship aerobatics aviator.
- First woman to perform an inverted ribbon cut at 10 feet above the ground.
- First female test driver of the auto industry.
- Member of the National Aviation Hall of Fame and the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America.
- Candidate for the 2014 Florida Aviation Hall of Fame.

She is known as the "first lady of firsts," according to her National Aviation Hall of Fame profile. Skelton, who died at age 85 in 2011, impressed and inspired those who knew her in The Villages. Jerry Conkle, president of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club, said Skelton's legacy will stand the test of time.

"She wouldn't be forgotten," he said. "She was quite a lady."

In the presence of greatness

Skelton grew up playing with model airplanes, not dolls, and then pored through aviation books, according to her National Aviation Hall of Fame profile. At age 12, she completed her first solo flight, on a Taylorcraft plane. At 18, she kicked off a professional aerobatics career, touring the southeastern air show circuit.

She won the International Feminine Aerobatic Championships in 1949 and 1950.



Daily Sun file art
Villager Betty Skelton is shown in 2010. Skelton, who died in 2011, is a candidate for the 2014 Florida Aviation Hall of Fame.

After retiring from the aerobatics aviation scene, Skelton drove the pace car at Daytona Beach during NASCAR Speed Weeks, and also set a stock car record.

She earned four Feminine World Land Speed Records and set a transcontinental speed record.

Skelton exhibited a calm demeanor and a humility about her successes, said Conkle, of the Village of Rio Ponderosa.

Skelton was invited to give a speech to the racing fan club and was inducted into the club's hall of fame, which boasts the likes of Geoff Bodine and Marvin Panch, Conkle said.

"The things that she did were astounding due to the fact of the era when she did them," he noted.

Betty Skelton timeline

1926: Skelton is born. She grows up playing with model airplanes, not dolls.

1938-1939: She completes her first solo flight at the age of 12.

1944: Skelton kicks off her professional aerobatics career, touring the southeastern air show circuit.

1949 & 1950: Skelton wins the International Feminine Aerobatics Championships.

1956: She begins to work with the General Motors Company in print and television advertisements, and automobile demonstrations.

1959: Skelton becomes the first woman to go through physical and psychological test given to the original Mercury Seven astronauts.

Source: National Aviation Hall of Fame

Past president of the club, Gerry Hafer, expressed similar sentiments about Skelton.

"The first time I met her, I was just impressed that someone so small and so gentle could have accomplished so much," the Village of Summerhill resident said. "I really was just blown away by her demeanor – such a polite, friendly person.

Hafer said Skelton exuded grandeur, but subtly.

"When you were with her, you knew you were in the presence of greatness," he said. "You just knew she was bigger than life, but it didn't leap out at you."

Hafer recalled a time when Skelton captivated club members with the

story of her experience of an engine flameout over Tampa Bay.

She was in engine failure and upside-down, and she felt certain she would crash but didn't, Hafer said.

"To hear her tell it was just fascinating," he explained.

Hafer said he once asked Skelton about her thought process while attempting various feats.

"She said, 'I always looked at things and thought how hard could it be?'," Hafer said. "That was kind of her attitude about things."

Skelton's noteworthy record also attracted the attention of members of The Villages Aviation Club.

Past president Brian Mullady invited Skelton to speak at a meeting, but she was unable due to her failing health, she said.

"She was probably one of the most experienced aviators that lived in The Villages," Mullady said. "We truly wanted to have her as a guest speaker. Unfortunately, it was too late."

Extraordinary person

Skelton loved dogs, had a great sense of humor, and was always impeccably dressed, said Spanierman, who leads the Allenwood Social Club, which Skelton was once involved in.

"To me, she was the epitome of class," said Spanierman. "She had been a beauty in her youth."

Skelton's husband, Allen Erde, also was involved in the club, Spanierman said.

Erde still lives in the Village of Amelia but could not be reached for comment.

Skelton also left a mark on Wendy Touchette, a member of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club.

"She had a love of going fast," said the Village of Sunset Point resident. "I like going fast. So we hit it off."

Skelton invited her to lunch, but the lunch never happened due to Skelton's busy schedule.

But Touchette did have the opportunity to drive Skelton's custom-made red Corvette – a memory she will always cherish.

Skelton had taken her Corvette to a car show and had Touchette go for a ride around the Saddlebrook Softball Complex parking lot with her in the passenger seat.

Skelton didn't bat an eye about handing over the reins, Touchette said.

A picture of Touchette and Skelton in the car now rests in Touchette's home as a keepsake.

Skelton autographed the photo and wrote on it, "To Wendy – Happy Landings!"

The aviation and racing pioneer's role in history was a huge source of inspiration for Touchette.

"Women were not supposed to be into racing, especially when she was coming up in the '40s and '50s," she said. "You weren't recognized back then. So for her to get noticed and get the inductions (into halls of fame) that she had was a great accomplishment."

After Skelton died, Touchette had a red jacket inscribed with a "B" over a racing club logo as a tribute to Skelton.

She still thinks of her friend often, she said.

Especially when a red Corvette whizzes by.



Submitted photo
Villagers Betty Skelton, left, and Wendy Touchette pose for a photo during a Villages Motor Racing Fan Club meeting. Touchette says Skelton, an aviation and racing pioneer who died in 2011, is one of her biggest inspirations.