

## MAUD LILLIE BOLIN

### Yakama Cowgirl Aviator

*By Lynn E. Bragg*

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Fingers tightly clenching the plane's doorway as her clothing was whipped about by the wind, the dark-haired young woman summoned her courage and leapt from the airplane. Free-falling toward the earth, Maud Bolin pulled at her parachute cord. The chute opened, braking her plunge with an abrupt jerk. She then enjoyed the pleasant experience of drifting through space to the ground. "I don't think I'll take another jump soon unless it becomes necessary, but I certainly enjoyed the sensation of the two trial jumps," Bolin later commented.

Bolin made the two parachute jumps as a prerequisite to receiving her pilot's license. Learning to fly in 1927, just nine years after Amelia Earhart began flying, Bolin was one of Washington's earliest female aviators, one of only two women living in the Yakima Valley to pilot a plane solo, and the first American Indian woman in the state (Yakama Tribe), and probably the country, to pilot an airplane.

Her first attempt to fly solo was one of Bolin's biggest thrills. She described how difficult it was for her as a beginner to hold the plane steady, but she finally learned to handle the control stick. Bringing the plane in for a good landing was her hardest problem. Still, she persevered until she was able to land without serious jolts or "zooms."

Bolin loved flying, participating in air shows and cross-country tours. In 1928 she made her first cross-country flight. With another pilot, she flew across the state dropping campaign literature for Senator Clarence C. Dill. A charter member of the Yakima Lady Birds, a woman's aviation club formed in 1928, she endeavored to make women of the Yakima Valley more flight-minded.

In 1930, after receiving her solo pilot's license, Bolin traveled with the Pacific Northern Airway Tour. Some 40 planes started out on the tour of 16 Northwest cities and towns. Bolin's plane was one of the few that actually completed the circuit, making all 16 scheduled stops. She proclaimed that participating had greatly increased her confidence in her solo flying skills. The Pacific Northern Airway Tour had great educational value for visitors at local airports as well as for the pilots.

The following year, in 1931, while en route to an air meet in Cleveland, Bolin's plane was involved in a collision in Superior, Montana. One of four planes being flown from Seattle to Cleveland as part of the Pacific Northern Airway Tour, Bolin's was the first to land. But within minutes, when another Seattle plane approached the airstrip in an attempted landing, it entered a crosscurrent of wind, causing it to smash into Bolin's plane on the landing strip. Both aircraft were demolished; only the engine and propeller of Bolin's could be salvaged. She received compensation from the other pilot and expected to be able to buy another plane, but

her husband Charles had to drive to Montana from their home in Toppenish to retrieve his wife and what was left of her aircraft.

Bolin encountered some serious challenges while flying: inclement weather, poor visibility, and overheating radiators were inherent dangers to the solo Northwest pilot. On another occasion her biplane struck a tractor during a landing, shearing off a wing.

Flying airplanes was just Bolin's latest venture in feminine independence. Her earlier career as a cowgirl and rodeo performer also took a great deal of courage, skill, and endurance. Bolin performed with the Spain Brothers' rodeo shows throughout the West. A daredevil, she often raced horses in rodeos such as the Pendleton Round-Up, Ellensburg Rodeo, and Toppenish Powwow.

She frequently competed in the women's relay race, a top feature in Northwest rodeos. In this treacherous race, one person held a string of tough-mouthed relay ponies while the rider made the quick change of mount needed for the race. Riders ran three laps on three different mounts, changing horses after each lap. Bolin rode in the Toppenish Powwow relays until she was well into her 30s, although she admitted that participating in the contest without practice had become difficult.

Bolin's roots were in the Northwest's earliest pioneer days. Her mother, Josephine (Bowzer) Lillie, was a member of the Yakama Tribe. Her father, Nevada Lillie, was an early white settler on the Yakama Indian Reservation, in the Yakima River valley, who had crossed the plains to settle in Washington Territory. He drove stagecoaches throughout central Washington and had a large interest in livestock. Lillie contributed substantially to the development of the Yakima Valley. In addition to ranching and driving stage, he served for many years as a United States deputy marshal. His wife Josephine earned the title, "Mother of Toppenish," because 40 acres of her 80-acre "Indian allotment" was platted to become the business district of the town of Toppenish.

Congress passed the Allotment Act of 1887 with the idea of turning Indians into farmers by allotting 40 to 160 acres of reservation land to each individual. The 1912 census showed that 4,548 allotments had been issued to Yakama tribal members, with each man, woman, and child typically receiving a tract of 80 acres. Unlike reservation land, the allotments (with the granting of a fee patent approved by the Bureau of Indian Affairs) could become deeded land vested in the owner's name and sold to white settlers. The results of the act were sometimes disastrous, as Indians who were uninterested in farming sold or lost their land to taxes. By the time the act was repealed 50 years later, Indian land holdings in the United States had dropped from 136 million acres to only 50 million acres.

No one took advantage of Josephine Lillie, a progressive, forward-looking woman who was vitally interested in community affairs. Josie filed her plat with the Yakima County Commission on April 4, 1905. "Toppenish" is a Yakama term meaning "sloping and spreading" and describes the sloping plains at the west end of the reservation's valley. The town boomed, and lots within the 40 acres sold at a feverish pace. This plat became the first deeded land on the Yakama Reservation.

The government granted the Lillies a trading post license in 1890. They erected a small building and opened a store and post office. Josephine served as the town's postmistress and operated the first store. Maud Claire Lillie, born on July 25, 1891, was the fifth of the Lillies' eight children.

Nevada and Josie separated in 1898. Seeking a better education for her children, Josie moved with them to Portland, Oregon. Maud Lillie studied drama, elocution, and millinery at the Western Academy of Elocution and Dramatics. In a 1929 newspaper interview, she talked about her original goals,

*I wanted to be an actress always, but though I studied for a career on the stage my mother would never give her sanction to such "wild" plans. I served six months' apprentice as a beauty parlor worker once and again I learned the millinery trade by serving a six months' apprenticeship there.*

On August 1, 1911, Maud Claire Lillie married Charles F. Bolin, a prominent attorney, cowboy, and Yakima Valley baseball star. The Bolins built a grand manor in Toppenish, the finest home on the Yakama Reservation. Their mansion was centered on an 80-acre ranch comprised of Maud's allotment adjoining the town of Toppenish. Although the couple had no children of their own, for a time they raised two children belonging to Maud's sister.

Bolin became an experienced rodeo performer and ran her own round-up business in Toppenish. At their ranch, Maud and Charley Bolin organized the first Indian Fair & Round-Up in Toppenish, later taking their show on the road. In these shows, Bolin performed with many notable rodeo cowboys and cowgirls of the day. Her Yakama Indian ancestors were accomplished horse riders. When Lewis and Clark explored the Northwest in 1805, the Yakamas had already been horsemen for decades.

Her career as a professional rodeo rider began with the Spain Brothers' Western Show. John Spain, the handsome gentleman cowboy, was a renowned bronc rider in his day. As a young man he won the title in the World Championship Saddle Bronc-busting Contest at the second Pendleton Round-Up, held in 1911. In the famous incident, after a last-go-around, one judge's vote settled a three-way tie among Spain, George Fletcher (the famous black cowboy), and Jackson Sundown (a noted Nez Perce bronc rider). Spain continued to win rodeo purses even after losing his hand in a roping accident.

A pretty, dark-eyed brunette, Maud Bolin was also a sought-after singer often featured at important Toppenish weddings, funerals, and social affairs. She might one day be found daintily pouring tea at a social affair and the next day be seen clad in soiled coveralls at the airport.

Using her dramatic and musical training, Bolin directed young members of her tribe in a gala production of *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, performed for the community in 1936. It was the first time a Northwest production had used Indian actors and actresses exclusively in a production about Indians. Bolin took great satisfaction in helping the Yakama actors, mostly high-school students or younger, achieve success with the production. She was proud of the youngsters and felt many of them had voices that with training would far surpass the ordinary. Bolin commented,

*There was not a trained voice among them. As for the dances—well, of course, they did not need training for them. They were dances every Indian child knows from the time he can stand and walk and run. They didn't rehearse those—they just did them. The dances were outstanding features to the pageant.*

Bolin added that to make the most of the limited time available for practice before the show she repeatedly summoned to their minds the stately memory of their grandparents, and they responded by fitting their actions to that memory.

Bolin again directed young Yakamas in a presentation of *Sacajawea*, performed at the 1948 Toppenish Powwow. This production had a cast of 120—most of them tribal members. The pageant was performed on three successive nights at the Toppenish Powwow and was host to most of the Yakima Valley population. Bolin's goal was to put on a historically accurate, emotionally appealing show using young Native American performers. This endeavor was a great success.

An asset to her community, Bolin was called upon to lead a wide variety of projects. In 1942 she headed the local United China Relief Committee, which succeeded in raising more than the Toppenish quota of contributions during World War II. She appealed to the citizens of Toppenish, stating, "Contributions will help to maintain Chinese morale at this supreme hour of crisis and keep open our one unbroken fighting front in the Far East."

In 1946 Toppenish sponsored a drive to build its own general hospital. Bolin contributed three quarters of an acre of land for the site of Central Memorial Hospital, now known as Providence Hospital, which opened its doors in 1951.

In 1950, with the assistance of the city of Toppenish and the Chamber of Commerce, Bolin appealed to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., for a fee patent on her allotted land in order to deed it to the city of Toppenish. As mentioned above, allotted land was held in trust for members of the Yakama Tribe and could not be deeded to non-Indians without permission of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The trust land lay across several streets within city limits, and the land was needed to extend the city limits and ensure the town's continued growth. The patent was approved, and the land was annexed to the city, becoming "Bolin's Green Addition."

The gracious Bolin mansion was a focal point in Toppenish. In a generous offer to donate her home to the town of Toppenish as a museum for the purpose of preserving antiques, historical relics, and art of both the Yakama people and the settlers, Bolin stated, "I want to donate my home as a memorial to my mother, the mother of Toppenish. All of the wonderful handcrafts and arts of the Indians and the history of this reservation town should be preserved for posterity." Fearing a lack of funds would prevent them from maintaining the home, the city turned down the offer. However, Bolin's offer to donate land for a city park was accepted. The park was named Pioneer Park and dedicated to the memory of local pioneers.

In 1959, Bolin was sent as a local representative from Region V to the White House Conference on Children and Youth. The Toppenish Powwow and Rodeo named July 2, 1960, Maud Bolin Day, in honor of all that she had contributed to the powwow, rodeo, and town. She died six years later, on February 17, 1966, at the age of 74.

Professional cowgirl, singer, aviator, drama coach, community leader—all of these comprised the multifaceted career of Maud Bolin. For her community and tribe, Bolin modeled independence, courage, and leadership at a time when women were expected to find fulfillment solely in their homes.

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