

Synopsis

The Legend of Pancho Barnes! chronicles the thrilling life and extraordinary times of aviation pioneer Florence Lowe "Pancho" Barnes, one of the most colorful and accomplished women pilots of the earliest 20th Century, and an ill-behaved woman who made history.

Born in 1901 into a wealthy Pasadena family, Florence Lowe was expected to be a debutante. She chose instead to become a tomboy and a rebel. Her desperate parents arranged a marriage to a minister. Florence responded by disguising herself as a man, and running off to war-torn Mexico. She emerged months later full of wild stories, and with the nickname "Pancho".

In 1928, Pancho decided to become a pilot for the thrill of it. Aviation soon became her profession. She was hired as a test pilot by Lockheed, and flew in the first Women's Transcontinental Air Race in 1929. She broke Amelia Earhart's air speed record, and was the first woman to take wing as a Hollywood stunt pilot – for Howard Hughes no less. It was a risky business, especially for a woman, but Pancho thrived on the danger. "If I didn't fly," she once told a stunned reporter, "I'd explode."

The Great Depression put a damper on Pancho's flying career, and her extravagant lifestyle. She was forced to flee Hollywood in 1935, and ended up in the Mojave Desert, near an Army Air Corps bombing range called Muroc. During WWII, Muroc (later called Edwards AFB) became an important aircraft proving ground. Pancho and her ranch became the social center of the place.

Known as the "Happy Bottom Riding Club", Pancho's ranch was a notorious, boisterous hangout frequented by some of the most important fliers of the post-WWII era. Pilots such as Chuck Yeager and Bob Hoover drank at her bar, and when Yeager broke the sound barrier in 1947, that's where he partied. Just a few years later however, things began to go downhill. Allegations surfaced that the Happy Bottom was a house of ill repute. The FBI began an investigation, and because of her wild, larger-than-life personality, Pancho found the accusations hard to refute. Meanwhile, as legal proceedings were underway in 1953, a mysterious fire destroyed the ranch. Many believed, the fire signaled the end of an era.

This is the story of a larger-than-life figure, a fully liberated woman in an era when few dared challenge convention – and the price one person paid for living outside of it.

This project features newly discovered documents from Barnes' personal files, never-before-seen photos, and rare movie footage to tell her story, and features interviews with her friends, historians and biographers.

