

Emma Carter Browning
c.1940 in J-3 Cub





Emma Carter was born October 26, 1910 in Eastland, Texas to J. W. and Pamela Carter. Emma's mother died when she was young, leaving J. W. to raise 11 children. She learned at an early age how to handle responsibility when she became the head of the household at 14.

Emma attended Eastland public schools and, anxious to get out into the business world, she went to Abilene Business College. In 1929, she recalls going to a grassy field with a few friends to see her first airplane. She paid \$1 for her first ride with a barnstormer in an open cockpit Eagle Rock bi-plane and was hooked--a portent of things to come. The following year, on a blind date, she met daredevil pilot and former airport owner, Robert Browning, Jr. They married December 26, 1932 and their only son, Bobby, was born June 25, 1934.

Together they made aviation their life. During the depression, when money was scarce, Emma was a piggy-back pilot for her barnstorming husband. They earned a living doing passenger hops, air shows, parachute jumps, and dead-stick landings. They did whatever it took to get the public to the airport where they sold airplane rides.

While still in Abilene, the Brownings were managing a fixed-base operation at Abilene Airport when Amelia Earhart paid a longer-than expected visit. She made a hard landing in her autogyro that necessitated repairs to the aircraft. During the week while Earhart's repairs were being completed, she stayed with the Brownings and Emma had an opportunity to get to know her. Emma has often shared her memories of Earhart with rapt audiences.

In 1939, Emma received her certification as a solo pilot. That same year, The Brownings learned about the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) from old barnstorming friend Hugh Herndon (Civil Aeronautics Authority private flying specialist and the first pilot to fly from Tokyo to Seattle across the Pacific.) Herndon urged them to come to Austin. In September, the Brownings packed up their Stinson SM8, their young son and, along with a U.T. student, flew to Austin landing at



Source: Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, PICA 19598.

The second graduating class of the Non-College Civilian Pilot Training program at Browning Aerial Service. Standing left of propeller is Emma Carter Browning; school executives N. H. Wittner and T. B. Barnett, Superintendent of Schools A. N. McCallum and Chamber of Commerce Aviation Committee chairman Max Bickler. Others are unidentified.

University Airport. There they leased the airport from an ailing Webb Ruff and began training pilots. The CPTP was a result of federal legislation known as the Civilian Pilot Training Act of 1939, President Roosevelt's attempt to strengthen a sagging military. The

creating the first organization to serve FBOs. That organization is known today as the National Air Transportation Association (NATA) and is headquartered in Washington, D.C. The Brownings also had a hand in the formation of the Civil Aeronautics Authority (1941)



The second annual meeting of the National Air Training Association in Kansas City, Missouri (December 1-2, 1941) Emma Browning is on the right at the second table next to the wall.

act gave the CAA authority to “train civilian pilots or to conduct programs for such training, including studies and researches as to the most desirable qualifications for aircraft pilots.”¹ On December 15, 1942 the CPTP became the War Training Service and the Brownings trained pilots for the U. S. Army Air Corps. Their flight school was the only licensed training facility to also offer aerobatic secondary advanced training in Waco UPF-7 aircraft. By 1944, the Brownings operated 21 aircraft and employed 10 flight instructors who taught 28 students.

In 1940, the Brownings and four other FBO owners met in Fort Worth and formed the Texas Flight Training Association affirming that aviation “knows no boundaries.” The following year the organization went national

and the Texas Aeronautics Commission (1945.)

In the fall of 1946 the Brownings moved their fixed-base operation to the city-owned Robert Mueller Municipal Airport. It was there that the “two surviving FBOs, Ragsdale Flying Service and Browning Aerial Service, would continue their role as regional leaders in the field of general aviation.”² Their business was focused primarily on aircraft service, maintenance, storage, charters, flight instruction and sales.

They became Piper distributors, selling many of the “new” tricycle gear



Hayden Head (deceased) former senator and member of the International Good Neighbor organization once said at an Austin City Council meeting that, “the finest thing on Robert Mueller Airport was Mrs. Browning.”



House Speaker Tip O'Neill pays a visit to Browning Aerial Services. (l-r) O'Neill, DNC chair Tony Coelho and Emma Browning. (March 19, 1982)

planes to a growing population of general aviation enthusiasts after the war. The Brownings also contracted with the City of Austin to service commercial airliners and had a unique 25-year charter arrangement with the University of Texas to shuttle staff personnel and students between the Austin campus and the McDonald Observatory on Mount Locke in Jeff Davis County far west Texas.

After a long illness, Robert Browning, Jr. passed away in June of 1973. Emma Browning, who had always been an integral part of her husband's business, became its president. She took over one of Austin's oldest companies occupying 22 acres at Mueller Municipal Airport with 100,000 square feet of hangar space, 13 planes of its own and 40 employees. Son Bobby managed the day-to-day operations while Emma continued to deal with city, state and fed-

eral regulatory agencies as well as Browning's vendors and customers. "...Emma cultivates her customers. She was always a good business-woman. She's tough but fair," said Moton Crockett, Jr. a friend, WWII pilot and Browning customer since 1955. Her business sense also came with a wry sense of humor. When "Charlie" Lindberg's plane was being serviced at Browning's FBO he reportedly asked Emma if he could borrow a plane. "Charlie," she said. "We don't loan airplanes, we rent them."

Although she was a qualified pilot and had taught many Browning students to fly, she earned her wings on the ground managing the business end of Browning Aerial Service. She never worried about being a woman in a man's business. She always felt that aviation was one of the few industries where women had equal footing. "Women have done everything from



Burt Rutan, designer of SpaceShipOne, talks with Austin aviation pioneer Emma Browning after his lecture October 29, 2004 at the LBJ Auditorium. Photo courtesy of the Austin American-Statesman

overhauling engines to running entire airports,” she said. “I never expected special privileges. If I had, I wouldn’t have lasted long. Now I own a piece of

key industry. From E. Lillian Todd who designed and built aircraft in 1906, and Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic to Lt. Col. Eileen Collins, who became the first female space shuttle commander in 1999, women have been a significant presence in aviation. In your presence this evening we have our own Texas aviation hero, Mrs. Emma Browning, who started flying in 1929. Mrs. Browning, your contributions have been many, through



Emma Browning addresses a meeting of the Austin Women’s Club honoring her achievements, August 7, 2003.

this mighty thing called aviation.”³

Emma Browning oversaw Browning Aerial Services until August of 1987 when she sold the business to a London, England holding company that became Signature Flight Services. At the time of the sale, Browning Aerial Services had a staff of 50 employees. Since that time she has continued to manage the family’s investments including an 800-acre ranch southwest of Austin. Even though she’s is no longer in the business, no one can question her loyalty to aviation. At a recent Texas Aviation Conference, Emma Browning admonished James Coyne, president of NATA, to “be more vocal and supportive of general aviation.”

Governor Rick Perry said of Mrs. Browning in March 2003 when presenting a certificate honoring her achievements, “The annals of history chronicle for generations to come the achievements of women and the role that they have played in building this



At 95, Emma Browning is in demand. She’s always eager to share her memories from her years in aviation. In October, 2004 she addressed the Amelia Earhart Luncheon at the Zonta International regional conference in Fredericksburg, Texas, sharing her emotional story of Amelia’s life and last flight. The Mineral Wells Zonta Chapter asked her to speak at their meeting the following month and in January, 2005 she spoke about Earhart to the Austin Community Eagles Society, a group of retired O6 military officers. They were enamored and asked her come back to talk about flying in the 30s and 40s.

tireless efforts, you and your dearly beloved husband built a proud legacy of success, highlighting to your fellow Texans the vision, ingenuity, and entrepreneurship characteristic of the early Texans who laid this state’s foundation

of greatness.”

Emma Carter Browning has outlived her most of her contemporaries, her son who passed away July 24, 2002, and his wife Mary Helen who passed on in February 2005. She goes to her office every day, remains active in the First Baptist Church and wants to find time to write two books. Her love of aviation and her memorabilia collected over her 70+ years in the industry will be forever immortalized in the Texas Aviation History Museum, a new passion for the feisty aviatrix/businesswoman. The museum is planned to be built in the Austin area.

¹ Civilian Pilot Training Act, U.S. Statues at Large 51 (1939), pp. 855 ff. (from Austin, Cleared for Takeoff, by Kenneth B. Ragsdale, University of Texas Press 2004

² Austin, Cleared for Takeoff, by Kenneth B. Ragsdale, University of Texas Press 2004

³ Austin American Statesman, February 16, 1987