

SPECIAL ISSUE! SALUTE TO 'THE RIGHT STUFF'

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Twentieth Anniversary

"THE RIGHT STUFF"

PANCHO BARNES

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Back in the SADDLE

Remembering the Unforgettable Pancho Barnes and her Happy Bottom Riding Club

By Nick T. Spark

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Looking every part the legendary aviatrix she was, Florence 'Pancho Barnes' poses proudly with her famous Travel Air *Mystery Ship*.



There was a time in the wake of World War II when aircraft technology advanced at a phenomenal pace. Jets and rocket-powered planes took to the skies and flew higher and faster than anyone had ever dreamed possible. In a few short years, the dreaded sound barrier was broken, and men were reaching for Mach 2. Planes flew towards the edge of space and records were re-written almost as quickly as they were published. The Air Force Flight Test Center, out in the middle of a God-forsaken desert nothingness known as Muroc, suddenly became the epicenter of an aviation revolution.



Above: After a childhood full of mischief and rebellion, Florence wedded the highly respectable Reverend C. Rankin Barnes. While it was hoped that Barnes would tame Florence's wild streak, she had little interest in playing the part of a minister's wife. She left Rankin, and although in later years they remained on speaking terms, she did her best during the early part of their separation to humiliate him. When she obtained her pilot's license in 1928, the less-than-demure Mrs. Barnes made it a point to buzz his church during Sunday services.

Top Right: Born into privilege in 1901 in Pasadena, Florence L. Lowe's father was a millionaire sportsman, her mother a blueblood Philadelphian. The person who most influenced young Florence, however, was her grandfather Professor Thaddeus Lowe. A free-wheeling self promoter and audacious inventor, Lowe was also a loquacious visionary who managed to persuade Lincoln to launch a fleet of surveillance balloons during the Civil War. His strong personality and interest in aviation made a deep impression on young Florence.

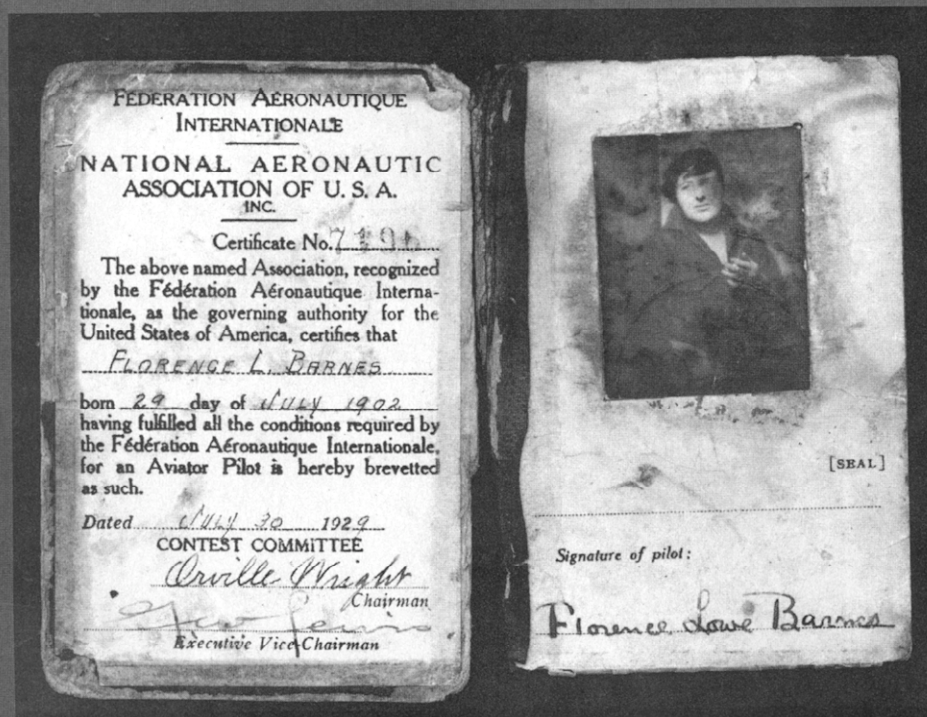
Escaping her unhappy marriage in 1927, Florence Barnes embarked on a banana boat for what turned out to be a world-class adventure. Unbeknownst to Florence, the boat was filled with guns intended for a group of Mexican revolutionaries. It was an extremely dangerous predicament but fortunately, Barnes was rescued by the ship's helmsman, an American named Roger Chute. Chute was not just an ordinary seaman, but a Stanford-educated fisheries researcher who had signed on for "the thrill of it". Chute and Florence were obvious soul mates, and ended up traveling together through Mexico for seven months.

Right: The trip changed Barnes' life. She disguised herself as a man, and lived like one much of the time. When she finally emerged from south of the border, Florence had a new name to go along with her liberated attitude: 'Pancho'. Chute had jokingly called his pants-wearing, cigarette smoking, hard riding female companion that for much of the trip, and it stuck. From now on, Florence Lowe would be forever known as Pancho





Above: In 1928 Pancho Barnes asked a WWI veteran pilot by the name of Ben Caitlin (standing) to teach her to fly. At first he dismissed her request. There were, after all, very few women pilots in those days. When Barnes remained adamant, he tried to scare her, taking her up for a heart-stopping demonstration flight. When she seemed singularly unaffected by the ride — she was ready to go back up again! — Caitlin gave in. Pancho proved to be a natural, fearless pilot. Sometimes her stunts verged on recklessness. “Amelia Earhart got all the publicity,” Pancho would later say, “and Bobbi Trout made all the money. But I was the best pilot.”



Left: Pancho's long-coveted Pilot's License and requisite membership in the National Aeronautic Association was signed by none other than Orville Wright. Her Student Pilot's License was only number 3522. Notably, Barnes' photo on the license was shot by George Hurrell, a friend who eventually became the chief portrait photographer at MGM. Hurrell later said he owed his career entirely to Pancho — that all her friends, especially Hollywood stars, noticed how attractive the normally dour Barnes looked in his photos!

Opposite Top: Shortly after she made her first solo flight, Pancho bought a Travel Air Speedwing previously owned by Howard Hawks. Thanks to her inheritance, (and no thanks to Reverend Barnes) she had money to burn, and threw elaborate parties attended by the wealthy and the famous. In addition to Hurrell her circle of friends included actors Erich von Stroheim and Ramon Navarro (bottom), one of the leading silent film stars of his day.





Above: Having acquired a reputation as an intrepid aviatrix, Barnes was hired as a test pilot, conducting maximum load tests on Lockheed's new Vega in 1929. (Photo from Walt Jefferies Collection)

Below: Later that same year she participated in the first all-female cross-country air race, known as the 'Powder Puff Derby'. Twenty-three of the thirty-four registered female pilots flew in the Derby, including the already-famous Amelia Earhart (right). While landing in Pecos, Texas, Pancho's airplane was nearly destroyed in a collision with an automobile. Ironically, it was driven by a fan who'd hoped to greet Barnes as she landed. Instead, he cost her the race.



Back in the SADDLE

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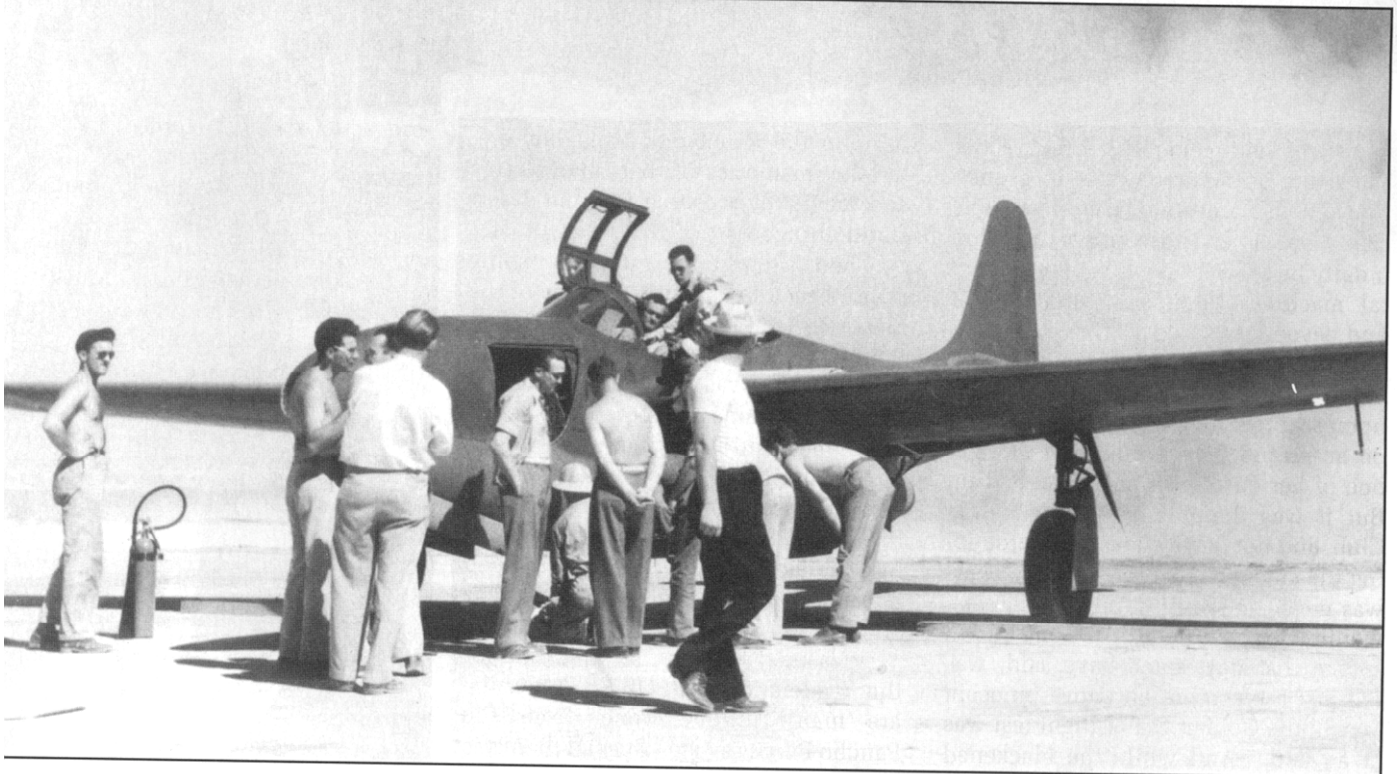
Every revolution has its leading figures, and here were men who have now become larger-than-life figures — Chuck Yeager, Scott Crossfield and Glen Edwards to name a few. Bold men with grit, determination, and an indefinable attribute that Tom Wolfe immortalized as 'The Right Stuff'. Among the men who would become future legends, there was also a woman: Florence 'Pancho' Barnes. She might not have been an Air Force test pilot, but she was a famed aviatrix, a legendary raconteur, and an icon in her own right, and while Pancho never saved a pilot by talking him down for a dead-stick landing, she was a ground-based wingman to nearly everyone at Muroc. "If it hadn't of been for Pancho's," goes the oft-told refrain, "We'd have all gone crazy out there."

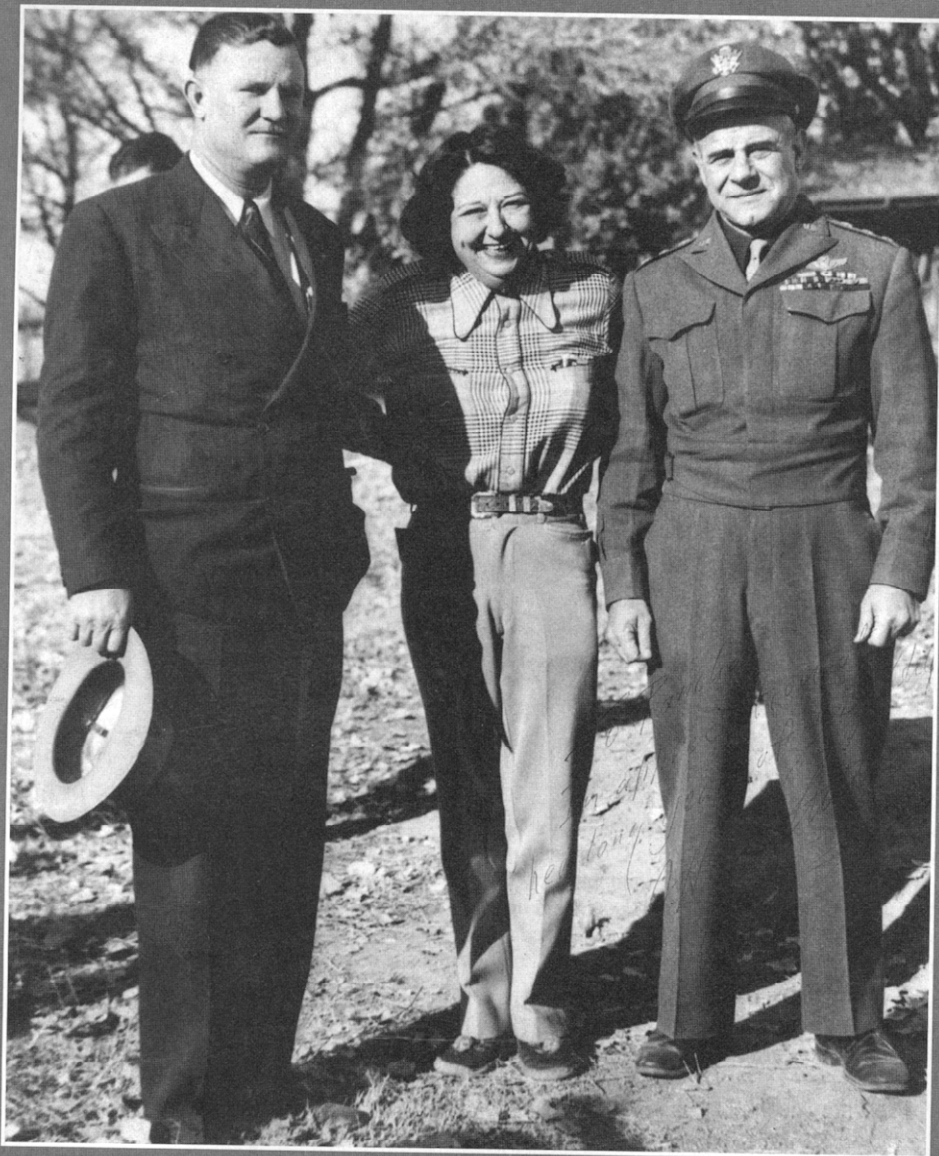
"Pancho's" was the *Rancho Oro Verde*, a small resort constructed by Barnes on the edge of the Rosamond dry lakebed in 1935. More popularly known as 'The Happy Bottom Riding Club', the Rancho was a welcome oasis for pilots, a place to unwind,



Above: Amelia Earhart didn't win the Derby — that honor was reserved for Gladys O'Donnell — but she did hold the woman's air speed record of 185 mph. Pancho was determined to beat that record, and to do it she bought (for a whopping \$13,000) a Travel Air Model R *Mystery Ship*. It was only the second Model R to come off the assembly line, and it seemed highly unlikely that it would end up in the hands of an aviatrix. Barnes, however, was not one to take no for an answer, and prevailed in her attempts to buy it. The low-wing, snub-nosed monoplane was just about the fastest thing on earth at the time, and on August 1, 1930, Barnes pushed it past 196 miles per hour in sustained flight. In so doing, she became the world's fastest woman pilot.

Below: Surprisingly, Pancho's *Rancho Oro Verde* prospered, but not because of the airport. The entrepreneurial Barnes managed to land contracts supplying fresh meat and milk to the Army outpost. The Army Air Corps greatly expanded Muroc, sending America's first jet fighter, the XP-59A (above), and other secret projects there for testing. Barnes expanded her dairy herd and pig farm to keep up with the demand, and did quite well in the process. When Pancho hosted a barbecue for some of the Army officers, she held their undivided attention. Not only did this woman know the nuts and bolts of aviation, but she could drink like a fish and curse like a sailor. Maybe even better than a sailor. "I just met the ugliest, foulest mouthed, strangest, and most intelligent woman I've ever met," someone once said after meeting Pancho. She had a tendency to leave people awestruck. (AFFTC/HO Photo)





Left: In 1947, General Jimmy Doolittle, a long-time friend of Pancho's, visited the Fly-Inn. After taking a ride on a supple stallion, Doolittle made the comment that being back in the saddle "gave me a happy bottom." An instant later Doolittle's turn of phrase was formally adopted by Barnes, and Pancho's Fly-Inn became the one and only *Happy Bottom Riding Club* (HBRC). While many civilians visited the ranch, military personnel were her most beloved, and core, customers. In an odd way, Pancho provided them with a vital service — giving test pilots their own private club in which to relax and shoot the breeze. That was important, given that the base had no such facilities (and no psychiatrists either!).

Right: Among the test pilots, young Air Force Captain Chuck Yeager (seen here with Pancho in later years) became a special favorite. When Yeager replaced Bell's civilian test pilot Slick Goodlin on the X-1 project in 1947, Pancho egged him on, telling him that a free steak dinner awaited the first military pilot to reach Mach One. Yeager eventually came back and told Pancho that he'd done it. It was top secret information at the time of course, but that night you'd never have known it. The party lasted into the wee hours of the morning.

Below: Eventually, word got around that anyone who broke an aviation record could get a free steak dinner at Pancho's. Sick of constantly having to give away T-bones as altitude and speed marks fell by the wayside, Pancho came up with a new gimmick. Anyone claiming to have broken a record would have to walk across an uncut sheet of rubber falsies. This bawdy 'Boobie Prize' became a legend in its own right.



socialize, and generally forget about the rigors of day-to-day life in a dust-bowl. It also proved to be an invaluable safety valve for those pilots who, on a daily basis, were pushing experimental machines to their breaking point and beyond.

In 1953, a wisp of smoke appeared on the horizon near the lakebed and upon seeing it from a distance while out on an errand, Pancho initially thought one of her customers had ploughed in. But it was the Happy Bottom Riding Club, and not an airplane crash producing the smoke. The cause of the blaze was never determined, and the Rancho would never be rebuilt. Gone up in smoke that day, some have said, was not just a place but an entire innocent epoch: the Golden Era of flight test was at an end. And while the blackened

ruins of the Rancho remain, they are, like the memories of that time, slowly and inevitably receding into the desert and nothingness.

Then just last year, an astonishing rumor began to spread that some of the most storied contents of the Happy Bottom Riding Club had survived the fire. That a vast archive of Pancho Barnes' personal papers had been preserved, and were being cataloged in preparation for conservation at a noted California university. It sounded like a wild, ludicrous and frankly unbelievable story — like the kind Pancho herself might tell. But guess what? It's all true.

Presented here for the first time for the readers of *AIRPOWER* Magazine are many unique items from the Pancho Barnes estate. Special thanks is



owed to Dr. Louis D'Elia who is preserving these remarkable artifacts, for generously sharing them with us and, soon, with the world-at-large. It is obvious, given the quality of these materials, that the Pancho Barnes archive is an unparalleled resource which will provide future generations with rare insight into the life of this amazing woman, and the halcyon days of flight testing at Muroc. 🍷

Right: Burnt remnant of happier times at the HBRC. Between the legal decisions and the fire, Pancho lost just about everything. While she'd made somewhat of a financial recovery from the Air Force, her debts mounted in the aftermath and her mental energy and physical strength were sapped. She and Mac moved to Cantil, and remained together there for nearly a decade before Pancho decided they should separate. They were finally divorced in 1968.





Above: What really made the Happy Bottom Riding Club famous (although some would say notorious!), were of course the hostesses. Young, beautiful and seemingly eager to please, the waitresses were personally selected by Pancho like 'Fred Harvey Girls'. While at work they all answered to the last name of 'Smith'. The girls at the Rancho had to strictly conform to a set of house rules. Rumors swirled among the locals concerning some of their recreational activities. Some said the hostesses swam or sunbathed nude while others suggested the Club was an out-and-out whorehouse. Most likely, the rumors were nothing more than just that - rumors. Pancho would not have encouraged such things, lest her club be labeled off limits to military personnel. "NEVER," her hostess rules stated in bold letters, "are you allowed to accept remuneration for the more intimate aspects of romance." (The inimitable Chuck Yeager, when pressed on this topic, put it quite succinctly. "Pancho's wasn't a cathouse", he said, "But it wasn't a church, either.")

Right: Later, when relations with the Air Force reached a low-point, Pancho added the letters 'A.F.' (for Air Force), an arrow, a lipstick mark and a saddle sore to her membership card logo. The meaning of all this subtlety was obvious.



Happy Bottom Riding Club

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Back in the SADDLE

Right: Ever the entrepreneur, Pancho gained a great deal of local acclaim by building grandstands on her cattle ranch, and hosting an officially sanctioned rodeo in 1949. It was about the biggest thing to happen for the civilians in the area since... forever! (Note the "Friday, Children Free" feature). Pancho also had a dance hall constructed, and brought bands up from Los Angeles to perform on weekends. Musically talented in her own right, Pancho wrote several published songs, including one for the Air Force, and the million-selling hit single, *By Your Side*.

PANCHO'S RODEO

3 NIGHTS FRIDAY, SATURDAY, SUNDAY - 8:00 P.M. **July 28-29-30**

5 BIG RODEO EVENTS - Stock Cutting Horse Contest
Every Night

HOLLYWOOD STARS - Special Events Galore

Friday, Children Free Saturday, Big Surprise Night
Sunday, FREE BARBECUE, 6:00 p. m. until Show Time

Free Camp Space. Bring the Whole Tribe and Spend the Weekend! Swimming Too

Highway 6 to Rosamond, Then East 12 Miles
Barnes Airport on CAA Chart - 24 Hour Service

Kitchen And Cocktail Bar Open 6 a. m. To 2 a. m.



NOTICE

THIS IS A GUEST RANCH HOTEL
FOR HOTEL ROOMS APPLY AT OFFICE
NON RESIDENT GUESTS
ARE REQUIRED TO HOLD CLUB MEMBERSHIP CARDS

DUE TO OUR CLOSE PROXIMITY TO EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE WE HAVE FOUND IT NECESSARY TO LIMIT THE NUMBER OF ENLISTED PERSONNEL PERMITTED CLUB MEMBERSHIP. THE QUOTA FOR ENLISTED MEMBERS IS AT PRESENT FILLED.

IF YOU ARE A G. I. AT EDWARDS AND DO NOT ALREADY HOLD A MEMBERSHIP CARD - PLEASE DO NOT APPLY AT THIS TIME, OR ATTEMPT TO USE THE FACILITIES OF THE CLUB.

Pancho Barnes

Left: In order to circumvent local liquor regulations, and to regulate who came and went, Pancho made the HBRC a private club. Eventually, it had more than 9,000 members, each of whom was issued a card. Signs posted at the entrance to the ranch discouraged the unauthorized from entering. (Note that snazzy 'jet-like' 1951 Studebaker Coupel)



Left: Shortly thereafter, the gloves came off as the Air Force announced plans to acquire Pancho's property as part of the Edwards expansion. Pancho quickly sued them and Gen. Holtoner himself, claiming conspiracy. It was called 'The War of the Mojave' by all the L.A. papers who followed every nasty turn of the proceedings. It would become an incredibly consuming, and eventually devastating legal battle, although Pancho (acting as her own attorney) would prevail. She was awarded over \$400,000 - nearly twice what the Air Force had originally offered for her property. But it would literally be a Pyrrhic victory. Here Pancho offers her sentiments posing with a photo of a North American F-86 Sabre Jet, inscribed to her by famed NAA test pilot George 'Wheaties' Welch.



Below: On November 14, 1953 — just six days before Scott Crossfield's historic first flight to Mach 2 — a tremendous explosion lifted the roof off of the HBRC's dance hall. The cause of the blast was never determined, but arson was suspected. The resulting blaze was absolutely devastating, and although fortunately no one was injured, the ranch's dried-out wooden buildings went up like kindling. Despite desperate efforts the fire could not be stopped. Many of the people there that day risked life and limb to retrieve what they could from the interior of the bar before it too succumbed. Pancho's beloved scrapbook containing all of her achievements in aviation was badly singed but, thanks to the fast work of a nameless friend, it was saved from the flames along with dozens of other priceless artifacts.

Selected items from the Pancho Barnes Archive to illustrate this article were used with the permission of Pancho Barnes Enterprises, Inc., holder of the copyright.



Above: To celebrate her new identity, Pancho commissioned this dramatic and compelling painting which would later hang in the bar of her famous ranch. Stains in sky are from smoke damage after the ranch burned down. It is clear from the portrait that even in the conservative 1920s, Pancho saw herself not just as a worldly spirit, but a fully liberated woman and a real original. Later she would tell a friend, "The most important thing is to be yourself. Don't try to be anyone else, because we've seen it already." That statement might just sum up her philosophy of life.

Right: In early 1952, Pancho married her fourth husband, ranch hand Mac McKendry, shown here with Pancho (right) and his prized Cessna 195. Their wedding was attended by more than one thousand people and featured Chuck Yeager as best man. Muroc Commanding Officer Gen. Al Boyd gave Pancho away in a fifty-eight second ceremony — one of the shortest on record. Pancho after all was in a hurry to party, and the fiesta that followed was a high point for her. Perhaps it represented her zenith. Surrounded by friends and the ranch that she'd built from scratch, Pancho seemed absolutely in her element, especially after she swapped her wedding dress for more standard western haberdashery and white cowboy boots.

