

FLYING JENNY

BY THEASA TUOHY

This alternative view of the days when the first Silurian first crawled out of the slime of New York's hangouts of hacks and organized themselves, is the debut chapter of a remarkable novel of those times by veteran (unless that's an oxymoron) Silurian Theasa Tuohy.... Flying Jenny (Kaylie Jones Books). In fact, this chapter draws on the exploit of a real-life Long Island flygirl, Elinor Smith who, on Sunday, October 21, 1928, became the first (and only) person to fly under all four East River bridges—in a Waco 9 biplane.

NEW YORK, 1929 – The Williamsburg Bridge was already jammed with photographers, spectators and newsreel cameras when Laura Bailey and Cheesy Clark arrived on the scene. They had a tough time shoving their way through to a good vantage spot at the railing, so they could see all the way upriver toward the Queensboro Bridge.

“So,” said Cheesy, removing the bulky flash attachment from his Speed Graphic as he set himself up for shooting, “here we is, me and you. A gal reporter and a cheese-cake artist. Whaddaya think da deal is?”

“This whole thing doesn’t make any sense.” Laura frowned as she wriggled into a space between a steel post and Cheesy, and stepped up on a rung of the railing for a better view. A puff of breeze warned that she needed to hold as tightly to her little hat with one hand as she was gripping the railing with the other. “I bet that span isn’t two hundred feet off the water,” she yelled to him over the noise of the crowd. “No one can fly under that. And look,” she said, pointing west toward the Manhattan side of the bridge, clogged with Sunday traffic moving to and from Queens over the East River. “There are cables and stuff hanging down that could catch and rip a wing in a second.”

Cheesy, the stub of a cigar clenched tight in his teeth, did no more than grunt. He was too busy jamming plates in and out of his Speed Graphic, turning one way for shots of the swelling crowd, whirling back,

shooting the bridge up ahead, the barges, Sunday sailors and other river traffic, then leaning back to get a dizzying shot of the soaring towers of the bridge they were on.

“Heck of a spread for the paper tomorrow,” he finally said. “Don’t wanna miss any angles. If the fool pilot gets himself killed or not, still heck of a spread.”

“Ouch, get your clodhopper off my foot,” Laura yelled, as a Pathé newsreel cameraman backed into her, angling for his own perspective.

Laura was at a distinct disadvantage jockeying among all these men, dressed as she was in a mid-calf length skirt that hobbled her movement, the tiny hat with a veil perched atop her dark marcelled wave.

“Sorry, lady,” the cameraman said. “But what are you doing here, anyway? You’re in the way.”

“So are you, buster,” Laura snapped, giving him a shove and turning her attention back to the bridge ahead, scanning the horizon on the outlandish possibility that there could really be a little bi-wing airplane approaching. It was a perfect summer day, blue, cloudless sky. The rumor was, hard to comprehend as it seemed, that some crazy barnstorming pilot from Roosevelt Field was planning to fly under all four bridges that crossed from Manhattan to Brooklyn and Queens.

People were doing all sorts of screwy things in 1929, as a glance at any newspaper would reveal. They called their era The Jazz Age, The Roaring Twenties. The Great War had been over for ten years, it was a time of boundless hope, optimism and prosperity. “Blue skies are smiling at me” was the song on everyone’s lips. The tabloids were full of flagpole sitters, flappers doing the Charleston, and marathon dancers leaning on their partners through endless nights. The more serious journals had many readers believing that Herbert Hoover would put a chicken in every pot, a car in every garage, and that the bull market would run forever. But everyone agreed that these stunt pilots took the cake. Ever since Charles Lindbergh had flown the Atlantic solo two years before, the entire world had gone nuts over flying.



Even women were doing it.

The vehicular traffic here on the Williamsburg Bridge was light but growing, it didn’t yet look as jammed as the Queensboro up ahead.

“Let’s hope he flies north to south,” Laura said to a reporter jammed next to her with an *Evening Graphic* press card stuck in his hat. “If he starts downriver from the Brooklyn Bridge, we won’t be able to see him coming, only going.”

The reporter laughed. “If he crashes into the Queensboro before he gets under it, we won’t be able to see that either. Some guy I just talked to has binoculars; he says he can see a lot of press stationed up there. They’ll get the good shots.”

“We shudda had another shooter here,” Cheesy grumbled. “I can catch action north, but with the bend in the river, I’m outta luck if he crashes into the Manhattan or the Brooklyn.”

“Crashes? You’ve got to crash doing this stunt,” said a photographer Laura recognized from the *Evening Standard*. “There’s hardly any clearance under most of these bridges.”

At that moment a collective “ooh ah” rose from the multiplying crowd. Laura could make out a dark speck moving through the sky toward the Queensboro. “Can you see any better through your camera lens?” she turned to ask Cheesy. But the photographer was slamming plates with the staccato of a machine gun.

The black spot was coming closer. It wobbled, caught a sunray that flashed on the water and headed straight for the dangling cables. Laura’s chest got tight; she realized she was holding her breath. The poor guy was going to be killed! She’d never seen anyone die before. She gritted her teeth. I suppose it’s part of the job. I can’t be weak kneed, I have to be strong. I have to prove myself. She watched the speck swerve, then merge with the shadowed waters beneath the bridge, her held breath turned to a gasp. The little spot popped up into the sun! A cheer went up from the bridge watchers. “He made it.” “That was close.” “Wow.” The crowd roared. The expanding dot was clearly identifiable as a plane now, fast approaching, threading its way among the ships and barges in the harbor. It neared the Williamsburg, and the open cockpit biplane rocked from side to side in greeting to the cheering, waving crowd. Laura could have sworn she caught a momentary glimpse of a grin under the cloth helmet and goggles of the figure in the cockpit. Bridge traffic was at a standstill.

The plane was heading straight for them, its nose pointing down. Laura elbowed and clawed her way back through the crowd and zigzagged through the stalled cars in what could only be described as a broken field run. The goal post was a view from the other side.

As she shoved one last person out of her way, she grabbed up a handful of hobbled skirt, yanked it above her knees,

kicked off her high heels – thank God they’re not the ones with the strap across the instep, she thought – and hoisted her lithe, five-foot-four-inch frame up several rungs on the bridge’s railing. Jeez, I hope Cheese has the good sense to be right behind me.

Sure enough, there he was hanging over the railing right beside her.

“You’re pretty fast on your feet for a broad,” he said with a grin.

“Darn right,” Laura yelled into the wind. Mild though the weather was, there was more than a little breeze when you stuck your head this far out. “I was saving you a spot.” She was already half over the rail leaning on her abdomen to help balance while she stretched over for a better view of the water.

“Holy cow, here he comes.” Laura could barely hear him over the sound of his camera’s slide click as she caught sight of the first dark shadow of wings spread on the water. At that same moment, she felt the wind tug at her hair. Uh oh. She didn’t dare grab at her hat. She needed both hands on the rail, or she’d be in the drink as well. With something akin to seasickness she watched the little veiled felt that represented a week’s salary sail off as it caught an air current. Borne by the fickle wind, it floated, then dipped, then glided as it leisurely made its way to the river far below.

She didn’t have time to mourn, here came the plane. It did the very same kind of pop up Laura had seen when it had come out from under the Queensboro moments before. I must ask someone how they do that, Laura thought. If the pilot is too dead to talk, someone at an airfield or someplace like that will know. Must be like gunning a car engine. Wow, she’d never had a story like this before. It was a real humdinger. She shifted her belly slightly on the railing and looked down, straight into the hole of metal that passed for a cockpit – a flutter of white.

A silk scarf flashed, blowing in the wind.

“Good grief,” Laura screamed at Cheesy, “that was a woman.” She knew it. She didn’t know why, but she just knew it! “A woman!” The tiny biplane and its shadow were already skimming through the sky and gliding along the choppy surface of the water. The crowd behind was laughing and cheering. Some people were actually dancing around the stalled cars or doing jigs on the roadway of the bridge.

“A woman!” Laura screamed again at Cheesy. “I’ve got to get to a phone.” As she dropped off the railing and scrambled into her shoes, she caught a view through the bridge’s lacy grillwork. The tiny dot of a plane was swinging slightly to its left trying to avoid the smokestack of a river barge on its way to the next bridge. I’ve got to file this story. I can’t stay to see what happens, Laura thought. Cheesy will get a picture.

