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Tiny's biographer

Elizabeth Whitley Roberson taught public school for 30 years in Martin County. She also taught at Martin Community College and East Carolina University and now teaches at Lawrence Academy in Bertie County. The longtime history teacher first heard about Tiny while pursuing a master's degree in the 1990s. Tiny didn't read or write so she didn't leave behind letters, and there was little on record about her. Roberson persevered, and met historians and Tiny's friends and relatives who helped her tell Tiny's story. Roberson also wrote "Weep Not for Me, Dear Mother," about a young man in the Civil War, and published his letters in a companion volume called "In Care of Yellow River." She lives in Williamston and is working on a book about women in the Civil War.

TINY BROADWICK

The First Lady of Parachuting

Most folks know our state has bragging rights for the Wright brothers' landmark flight at Kitty Hawk. But North Carolina also claims the first parachute jump by a woman, one big feat made by a little woman named Tiny Broadwick. A nonfiction book, "Tiny Broadwick, The First Lady of Parachuting" by Elizabeth Whitley Roberson, reveals a spirited pioneer who soared to bold heights.

As the book recounts, Tiny was born Georgia Ann Thompson in Granville County in 1893. She was the youngest of seven girls, and at three pounds, was soon called "Tiny." The farm family struggled to stay afloat, and Tiny remembered days in tobacco fields. When she was 6, the family moved to Henderson for employment at the Harriet Cotton Mill. When Tiny was 12, she married a man named Jacobs, and at age 13 had a daughter named Verla. Soon after, her husband deserted her, and she worked 12- and 14-hour mill shifts, making 40 cents a day and breastfeeding her infant on breaks.

She heard from co-workers that the Johnny J. Jones Carnival was coming to the State Fair, and found a ride to Raleigh. The performance featured a showman named Charles Broadwick, who ascended in a hot-air balloon. He pulled into a parachute harnessed at the bottom, jauntily lit a cigarette, and floated back down. As she watched, Tiny's imagination expanded up and away.

"When I saw this balloon go up, I knew that's all I ever wanted to do!" she reportedly told a Durham Herald reporter later. Determined to "get into the act," Tiny lobbied Broadwick. At 4 feet 1 inches and 80 pounds, her size would be an aeronautical advantage. Broadwick finally agreed and assured Tiny's hesitant mother that he would take good care of Tiny and send home salary money for Verla's support and education. Baby Verla stayed with Tiny's mother, and Tiny joined the circus.

Broadwick, who later legally adopted Tiny, promoted her in pink bows, bonnet and bloomers. "I was far from being a doll, but that's the way they billed me," Tiny said. Her first jump, from a hot-air balloon in 1908, was at the State Fair. She landed in a blackberry bush, but greeted rescuers with a smile.

"Doll Girl," as she was called, started learning her craft. There were unpredictable winds, perky clouds, all-cotton parachutes and the huge, inflatable hot-air balloons. The balloons stood 92 feet tall and 56 feet wide and were heated by coal oil, with the potential for fire. Without an altimeter, Tiny listened keenly for Broadwick's drop signal, a blank fired by a pistol. She learned how to get out of jams quickly and to depend on herself.

At her shows, Tiny would hang from long cotton ropes suspended on a trapeze. When the air inside the balloon cooled and it reached its height, Tiny would trigger her parachute and sway down gracefully to cheering crowds.

Tiny occasionally would refuse to go up if she sensed danger. Even so, she tested fate. Her balloon burst from heat scorplings and she fell on a tent. Another time, she landed on a windmill, breaking her arm. Despite the accidents, the daring aerialist eventually developed a riveting act that included 3,000-foot ascensions, trapeze stunts and multi-drops from red, white and blue parachutes.

In 1912, Tiny married a seaman named Andrew Olsen, who left for months at a time. The life proved lonesome, and she returned to regular parachuting in 1913.

Also in 1912, she met Glenn Martin, an ambitious pilot known for his barnstorming exhibitions. They teamed up and Tiny became the first woman to drop from an airplane in 1913. Wearing a dark red costume and a smile, Tiny jumped from Martin's airplane and swayed down to Los Angeles soil.

Tiny achieved another first that year when she jumped from a hydroplane (and dropped into Lake Michigan). Afterward, a tall, serious-looking man approached her. "You're too small to do that," said the man, none other than the great Wilbur Wright. Tiny reported she shook his hand and nervously replied, "Thank you."

She and Martin became in great demand. On a promotional drop for Los Angeles merchants, they sent 3,000 envelopes with gift coupons fluttering to the earth, while people below of all economic classes leaped high to grasp the goods.

In 1916 she married Harry Brown, who pioneered the Greyhound Bus Line and who later abandoned her. Brown disapproved of her work, so she retired for a while, but resumed jumping in 1920. (She and Broadwick, her foster father, parted ways during World War I, partly due to his growing legal and financial problems.)

In 1922, after more than 1,000 jumps, she retired, somewhat reluctantly. As she said, "I breathe so much better up there when I jump, and I'm getting so I don't like to breathe on earth." After retiring, she worked as an elderly companion and housekeeper for awhile. Glenn Martin became a renowned military airplane manufacturer.

During World War II, Tiny found work producing airplane parts. This helped her stay in touch with Martin, with

whom she shared happy memories. She also demonstrated parachuting for U.S. Army paratroopers. "I'd always take one of my chutes along and compare it with the ones they were using. The boys would tell me they would never jump in anything like that! But I'd tell them it must have been OK, I'm still here!"

Visiting the 82nd Airborne Group in Ft. Bragg, she was asked if she ever had a reserve chute. "Yes, home in the garage in case I tore the one I was wearing!" she replied.

Sharing her experiences helped refine parachutes and

increase aviation safety for thousands. Tiny received several aviation honors, including the John Glenn Medal in 1964. In 1976, she was inducted in the OX5 Hall of Fame, along with the Wright Brothers and Charles Lindbergh. Tiny went on sailplane and blimp rides and appeared on TV shows such as "I've Got A Secret." Her friend Maxine Hicks said everyone loved her. "She had friends everywhere!"

Tiny regretted leaving Verla but was pleased about how she was raised. "I've talked to God many times about the care my mother took of my daughter. She's a lovely woman, she's got a lovely family and I thank God for that!"

In 1974, Tiny was thrilled when her granddaughter, Bonnie Young,

made her first parachute jump in Franklin County. Tiny had to laugh when Bonnie landed in a tree.

Tiny died at age 85 in California in 1978. In 2005, she was inducted into the portrait galley at the Wright Brothers National Memorial visitor center in Kill Devil Hills. She is buried in Sunset Gardens in Henderson, where a marker notes her achievement as "First Lady of Parachuting." 📍

— Karen Olson House

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The book

Published by Pelican Publishing Company in Gretna, La., the book is 112 pages, with 38 black and white photos. It retails for \$9.95 and sells online for \$7.96. (800) 843-1724 or www.pelicanpub.com