

Sooner Nation

Gene Nora Jessen broke flying boundaries for women at OU, NASA and beyond



Courtesy Gene Nora Jessen

Jessen was OU's first woman flight instructor and among the first women to test for space training.

Nearly 70 years later, Gene Nora Jessen can still remember the first time she took the controls of a plane and left the earth behind.

"As soon as I discovered flying, I thought, 'That's for me. I want to do that,'" says Jessen, whose passion led her to the same University of Oklahoma Max Westheimer Airport runways where young Sooner Flight Academy campers take wing.

But Jessen, now 85, didn't stop there—she joined an

astronaut testing program for women, crisscrossed the nation in a three-plane formation, and became a three-time aviation author.

Jessen left Illinois in 1955, drawn by the reputation of OU's flight program. "I wanted to be a professional pilot," she says from her home in Boise, Idaho. "If you're hooked on flying, you'll find a way."

Jessen's way was working as OU's first woman flight

instructor and earning multiple flight ratings while taking courses toward an English degree. Shortly after graduating in 1961, a can't-miss opportunity appeared on the horizon.

"I heard about a secret female astronaut training program," Jessen relates in her first-person account, *The Fabulous Flight of the Three Musketeers*. "I brazenly wrote [program director] Dr. Lovelace, insisting that he shouldn't go forward without me. Amazingly, he wrote back, inviting me in." Because OU wouldn't give Jessen time off, she quit her flight instructor job.

Dr. W. Randolph Lovelace's Albuquerque, N.M., clinic was the site of testing for the nation's pioneering Project Mercury astronauts in 1959. He began a "Women in Space Program" to gauge if females could withstand the same physical and psychological trials. Jessen was one of 25 selected and one of only 13 who passed.

Unbeknownst to them all, Lovelace conducted the exams without NASA's permission, and the program was quickly shuttered.

"It was fun and a challenge. And perhaps I thought, 'I'll take these tests and I'll get to go into space someday,'" Jessen admits. "In reality, that wasn't going to happen right then." It was 22 additional years until NASA sent a woman into space.

"There I was, now an unemployed flight instructor and 'astro not,'" she wrote wryly, "desperate for a job flying airplanes to finish paying off college."

Jessen applied to Beech Aircraft Corp. in Wichita, Kan., at the perfect moment. Beech was rolling out a new, smaller aircraft, "The Musketeer," and wanted to introduce it to customers with a splashy, 90-day tour.

The company hired three pilots to fly the planes in formation while visiting every contiguous state during the summer and fall of 1962. Jessen's partners were former U.S. Air Force pilot Mike Gordon and nationally recognized aerobatic pilot Joyce Case. They were followed by a "chase plane" containing a mechanic and public relations crew.

"What could generate more attention than two of the three pilots being female?" Jessen wrote. "The whole idea of having two females flying on this tour was to show the customer that this is such a great airplane that EVEN GIRLS could fly it.

"Joyce and I didn't have that attitude. How many female pilots got to fly the Beech line? We were grateful; nah, thrilled."

None of the three pilots had ever flown in formation—or in their assigned planes—before taking off. Each day they flew in tandem to a new destination, where they buzzed the runway before landing in front of franchise owners, customers and reporters.

Jessen and Case learned to exit their planes in the required uniform of dress, stilettos and jewelry, walking along the wing while holding down wind-blown skirts. The pilots' afternoons were packed with demonstration flights for sales staff and

customers. Evenings were for socializing with franchise owners before collapsing into a hotel bed.

"My job was to make customers look good in the airplane so they'd enjoy it and want to buy one," Jessen says. "I never had anyone refuse to fly with me because I was female; they accepted that Beech wasn't going to send anybody who couldn't fly that airplane."

Just eight days into the trip, the tour's PR team asked the trio to fly wingtip to wingtip through the Grand Canyon. "We literally had no maneuvering room," Jessen wrote. "I hung on for dear life to the control yoke and throttle, heart pounding."

The pilots' adventures also included circling Seattle's brand-new Space Needle and meeting flying legend and flamboyant 1920s

barnstormer "Colonel" Roscoe Turner—who wore diamond-studded wings and flew with a pet lion named Gilmore.

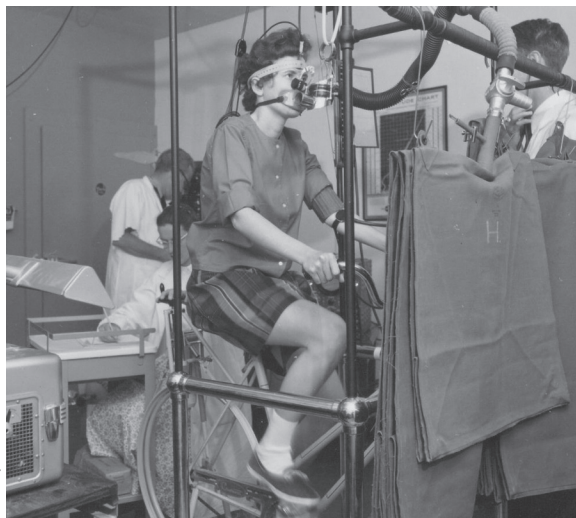
But Jessen says her greatest joy was seeing the United States from coast to coast. "I can remember many times taking off and thinking, 'They're paying me to do this.'"

After the tour concluded, she continued working for Beech, where she met her late husband, Bob. The two purchased a Beech franchise in Boise and later started a fixed-base operation, Boise Air Service.

Jessen only hung up her wings after the age of 70. For years, she competed in air races sponsored by the Ninety-Nines International Organization of Women Pilots and served as the Ninety-Nines' president. She treasures friendships made along the way.

"Women who fly airplanes are interesting people," Jessen reflects. "They are going out in the world and doing something that not everybody does. Some people think they're crazy, and some think they're wonderful. It's an adventure."

Anne Barajas Harp is editor of Sooner Magazine.



Courtesy Museum of Women Pilots

Jessen undergoes rigorous physical testing as one of 25 women selected for the "Women in Space Program." The women's program was swiftly shut down by NASA.