

“I WAS A DIFFERENT MAN”: WINTER 1924

## J. Herman Banning

### The Day I Sprouted Wings

J. Herman Banning (1899–1933) was the first licensed black male pilot in the United States. After briefly studying engineering at Iowa State College in Ames, he left school to take flying lessons. Banning describes these and the unorthodox conditions surrounding his 1924 maiden solo flight for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the leading “race” papers of the day. Opportunities for black pilots, as might be suspected, were next to zero, even during the “Lindbergh boom” that followed his 1927 transatlantic flight. From about 1922 to 1928 Banning ran an automobile repair business in Ames, but in 1929 he moved to Los Angeles to become the “chief pilot” for the Bessie Coleman Aero Club. Named after the first African American to gain a pilot’s license—Bessie Coleman, who was tragically killed in a flying accident in 1926—the organization sought to promote aviation among African Americans, a real challenge given segregation, discrimination, and economic hard times. Nevertheless, in 1932 Banning and another black pilot, Thomas Allen, gained much publicity by flying cross-country from Los Angeles to Long Island, New York. Though they were actually airborne for less than forty-two hours, their trip lasted three weeks, because at every stop the men had to raise money for fuel and maintenance to keep their plane flying. After returning to California Banning tried to rent a plane to participate in an airshow but was refused because of his race. Instead, he went up as a passenger with a relatively inexperienced white pilot who lost control of the aircraft. It started to spin and with thousands watching dove into the ground, killing both men.

---

It has often been said truth is stranger than fiction. From an aeronautical standpoint, the above assertion ceases to be a mere saying and becomes an indisputable fact. Perchance, the aeronautical pursuits of our

birdmen, as recounted by them, contain much more fiction than fact, but that as it may, I shall give you, without departing from the pathways of truth, a resume of some of my earlier flying experiences.

The one big moment in a pilot's life is the day he is allowed to solo. He remembers this event until his dying day, and in rare cases this has been known to be one and the same day. This is the day on which, for the first time, the novice soars up and into the blue sky all alone—sole commander of his craft. The day of days. The moment toward which all of his weary hours of training have been pointed. This is the time when the student pilot conclusively proves to the world at large that he has both nerve and ability. To himself he proves that he is nothing but a scared, witless fool who hasn't had half enough flying lessons.

But permit me to tell my own story. In the little town of Ames, Ia., during the winter of 1924, I decided that motorcycles and automobiles were too slow and uninteresting so I became air-minded, and between those wintry blizzards and those blowing snow storms I would journey to Fisher Flying Field at Des Moines—30 miles away—to learn to fly. There I would shiver and shake through a half hour's dual instruction. The cold weather gave my natural shivering instinct quite an outlet. I need not mention the added "shiverability" provided by the shaking, trembling, dilapidated old plane in which we trained. Suffice it to say that after 3 hours and 45 minutes of training, and this stretched over a period of five months' time, I approached that stage of the game wherein the instructor permits the student to glide toward the landing field—if he can find it—and attempt a landing. Every moment, of course, is closely supervised by the instructor. This particular day the pilot complimented me on my progress up to that date, and five minutes later he took a new student up in the same ship and was killed in a crash. Lieutenant Fisher was a very good pilot, but made the fatal mistake of allowing a rank novice to attempt to fly the ship at too low an altitude. This was a sad blow to me, and my friends insisted that it should mark my exit from aviation. I thought differently, however, and vowed to myself that I would carry on and profit by his mistake.

The airplane was a total wreck, but careful investigation disclosed that the Curtis O-X-5 motor was only slightly damaged. I bought it for a

paltry sum and had it moved to my auto repair shop at Ames. This was during the period when the War Department was dumping hundreds of old war surplus planes on the market at ridiculously low prices. I watched the advertisements and finally secured an old plane fuselage, or body and a set of wings. To my inexperienced eyes they appeared to be in fair condition. Everyone called me a d— — n fool, so, to keep down argument I admitted that such was the case and kept working until at last one spring day I was able to tow the repaired parts to a little nearby cow pasture and start assembly of my first airplane. With the assistance of several white mechanically inclined friends and the aid of an instruction book, purchased from Curtis Aeroplane Company, I was able to set up the ship in every detail. The motor was perfect, the ship complete—but there it stood for three weeks. New airplanes are given their first test flight by experienced pilots before anyone else can fly them and any necessary changes in control or balance are then made so that the plane will have normal flying qualities. In my particular case I had never even flown a tested plane alone, much less one which no one had ever flown, and I did not have half the usual flying training.

I decided to use common sense, or rather rare judgment, whichever you may call it, so I called on L. C. Miller, a well-known pilot, to test the ship for me. He agreed over the long-distance phone that he would do this for \$50. When he arrived in Ames he looked over my ship and emphatically said, “Nothing doing.” I tried other pilots and they all seemed to know that I was using the same motor behind which Fisher was killed, and they all refused to fly the ship. Each day I would go to my port—if I may call my cow pasture such. It cost the whole sum of \$5 per month. I would start the motor, climb in the seat and taxi or slowly roll along the ground. I would only partially open the throttle, thereby gaining very little speed. Finally this became the town joke—Banning and his ground plane.

One Saturday afternoon I made my usual airport jaunt alone, warmed up the motor, taxied to the far end of the field, turned around into the wind with business-like precision and cocked my throttle wide open. I fully intended to let the ship leave the ground for a few feet, cut my throttle and allow the ship to come to a stop before reaching the far

end of the field. I certainly had no intentions of actually flying, but to my great surprise and intense discomfiture the full power blast of the motor carried me down the field far faster than I had expected and there was a very substantial fence dead ahead. Instinctively I yanked backward on the stick and there I was in the air alone—forced by a mere accident to solo in a ship which had never been flown before. To my genuine astonishment I found myself calm and collected. I immediately became self-reliant. I felt as only one who flies can feel—that here, at last, I have conquered a new world, have moved into a new sphere. I had sprouted wings, a rhapsody in air, but the stark realization came to me that I had yet a landing to make!

Maybe this wasn't going to be so hot after all. Well, the ship flew level and straight almost of its own accord; perfect job of rigging. I circled the field three times, headed into the wind, closed the throttle, opened my mouth and eyes and started down in an erratic glide. I fixed my eyes on a certain point on the field and waited for whatever was to be. A minute later the machine settled on the ground with the gracefulness of a bird, rolling only a few feet before stopping. I had made it! I breathed a long sigh of relief and clambered from the ship to the ground and, immediately, presto-change, a great transformation occurred. My head erect, eyes to the front, shoulders squared, I was a different man. A full-fledged pilot. Something apart from the common clay. At least, I thought so until I attempted my next flight. A rude awakening, indeed, but, ah, my dear friend, that is another story.

Happy landing, old dear!

*Pittsburgh Courier*, December 17, 1932