



National Balloon Museum

Hall of Fame Nomination Form

First Name: Barbara Last Name: Keith

Nationality: USA

Date and place of Birth: (Year/Month/Day): 1921

Year and place of Death (Year/Month/Day): 11-January-1964

Short Biography (250 words):

Barbara Robinson Keith was born in Concord, New Hampshire in 1921. She dropped out of school, married and had five children by the time she was 21. Little is known from this point to 1952 when she ended up in Hartford, Connecticut. She had married Murray Keith, her second husband and became a widow.

She had an interest in flying which lead to the restoration of an old Taylorcraft airplane with a friend, which she learned to fly but, seemingly, never got a license. She

She was a founding member of Parachutes, Inc, the first sport parachute center in the country, opened in May of 1959, at the Orange Municipal Airport in Orange, Massachusetts. She served as the secretary of Parachutes, Inc in 1962. Barbara made her first jump from there on July 23, 1959. Over the next four years she made dozens more while promoting the sport with a display in the window of the Dougherty Drug Store, on Farmington Avenue in Hartford, where she worked. That landed her an article in the Hartford Courant about her aerial exploits and the moniker of the "Flying Grandmother" as she had seven grandchildren by the early 1960's when she was in her early 40's.

She then joined the Balloon Club of America, and Barbara became a working member with her first balloon flight made with two of its pilots, from Valley Forge on October 15, 1960 and her second on July 1961.

Sport hot air balloons were just coming on the market in late 1961 Barbara contacted Raven Industries of South Dakota, the only manufacturer at the time. By June 1962 she was tethering a small demonstrator hot air balloon out in Ellington, CT. where she became the first person in New England to sit in and tether a modern-day hot air balloon.

Low on funds, Barbara created a club with some friends, Balloons, Inc, in 1963 and together they purchased a brand new single-place Raven S-40 balloon using her airplane as collateral for the loan of \$3,500.00 USD. Barbara went to Sioux Falls to pick it up and get in a couple of flights, one of them her solo on June 19, 1963. Back in Connecticut she made the first flights of a modern hot air balloon in the state, and probably also in New England, from a backyard in Farmington, Connecticut.

Later that same summer she flew from Pilgrim Airport in Massachusetts. Balloons Inc. and performed commercial promotions flying from country fairs in Rhode Island and eastern Connecticut. With several more flights from Pilgrim Airport, Barbara had accumulated 11 documented solo flights by the end of the year.

The Hartford Current articles of the time describe one late afternoon flight of 2 hours, which took her way out to Watertown, CT and another a few days later, which lasted about 5 minutes and ended up in the town forest because of fuel and burner systems malfunction.

In January 1964 Barbara received an invitation to the Catalina Island Balloon Race in California. She made 15 flights in her lifetime, logged 17 hours 44 minutes. She met up with Don Piccard of Raven Industries in January and they drove out to California together. As the sport was so young there were only eight participants with Barbara being the only woman.

Cliff Robertson said that Barbara, "the nice young grandmother from Connecticut", gave every pilot a small stuffed Teddy Bear for good luck just prior to the race.

The plan was to fly to the mainland, just over 20 miles as the crow flies. Small boats were arranged to follow each balloon. It wasn't the best weather, and the sea was very choppy, Barbara ended up on an indirect diagonal flight path, and her chase boat had issues and turned around. She was left alone, ran out her fuel, and inflated her life preserver as she ditched in the sea. She sent up one flare but there was no one to see it. Barbara Keith died of a combination of hypothermia and then drowning. She became the first person to perish in a ballooning incident in the hot air balloon community. There was never another Catalina Balloon Race.

Barbara's Raven S-40 balloon system was eventually donated to the New England Air Museum.

Sources:

Kathy Wadsworth including her book Northeast Pioneer Aeronauts "A Tribute" 2013.

Richard Douglas

<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/09/12/archives/fatal-balloon-crash-laid-to-deviation-from-course.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/01/21/archives/woman-balloonist-is-found-dead.html>

https://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675078609_Catalina-Island-hot-air-balloon-race-disaster_Barbara-Keith_1964_Don-Piccard

Committee:

Achievements, honors and awards:

Awards: