***Hidden Hero: Emory Conrad Malick (1881-1958),***

***Pioneer in Aviation***

I am currently writing the biography of Emory Conrad Malick, who was the first licensed African American aviator. Mr. Malick earned his International Pilot’s License (also known as the *Federation Aeronautique Internationale,* or F.A.I., License), #105, on March 20, 1912, while attending the Curtiss School of Aviation on North Island, San Diego, California. Mr. Malick was also the first African American pilot to earn his Federal Airline Transport License, #1716, in 1927, but his name is as yet unknown. Eugene Bullard flew for France in 1917, since he was forbidden to fly for his own country during World War I. In 1921, another African American, the famed Bessie Coleman, also had to travel to France to achieve her license, and she is credited as being the first black pilot to fly in the United States. James Herman Banning is considered to be the first African American pilot to be licensed in his own country (and was, in fact, the first black pilot to earn a Limited Commercial License, circa 1927), and Charles Alfred “Chief” Anderson, the Chief Flight Instructor for the Tuskegee Airmen, has long been considered to be the first African American pilot to earn a Federal Transport License, which he earned in 1932. But, in fact, Emory C. Malick preceded them all.

The third child of Darius and Susan Conrad Malick, Emory was born in Seven Points, Lower Augusta Township, Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, on December 29, 1881. On December 17, 1887, soon before Emory’s sixth birthday, his mother, “Susanna,” succumbed to typhoid fever. Darius, a carpenter, and now a widower with five young children (a sixth child, Cordelia, died in 1882), put the two youngest—Annie, aged two, and infant Cora—up for adoption. Soon thereafter, Darius married the woman who helped place Emory’s little sisters, and then, together, they produced seven more children. By now the family had moved to a stately house, built by Darius, in nearby Sunbury. Emory lived and worked on a farm as a servant and farm hand, went to public grammar school, and completed one year of high school.

Emory also worked as a carpenter with his father in Harrisburg, Pa., where they helped to build the new Capitol Building and installed the mahogany veneering in the Pennsylvania Railroad dining and sleeping cars. By 1910, Emory lived in Philadelphia; however, he frequently traveled back to the Sunbury area to work on his passion: flying. He built and flew his own gliders, and, on July 24, 1911, he made his first recorded flight in his homemade engine-powered biplane. He also made headlines in 1912 and again in the summer of 1914, when he assembled—and improved upon—his own Curtiss “pusher,” an engine-powered “aeroplane,” which he proceeded to fly over Rolling Green Park during a Sunday afternoon concert, and the next day, on August 31, over downtown Selinsgrove, “to the wonderment of all!” Factories were “temporarily shut down to witness the novelty.” So Emory Conrad Malick was the first pilot to fly through the skies of both Northumberland and Snyder Counties in central Pennsylvania, ushering in “a new epoch in local history.”

On September 11, 1914, just days after his triumphant flights, Emory took his Curtiss pusher up for one more foray over Selinsgrove. Unfortunately, this time he flew a little too low and got entangled in the electrical wires, crashing to the ground, destroying his beloved aeroplane, and paralyzing “trolley and local factories for almost an hour.” Before passing out and being rushed to Dr. Decker’s office, he glanced up and saw a wide-eyed first-grader gaping in awe at the vision: Emory lying crumpled on the dirt road, caught in a tangle of wood, metal, wheels, wires, twisted, torn fabric, and billows of black smoke.

“Little boy, what’s your name?” croaked Emory. “You look like you could be my nephew Wilfred!”

Little Will was already gone. He didn’t stop running until he was safe inside his own kitchen.

*“Mama! Mama!”* he panted. “There was a man…on the ground…I think he fell out of the sky…*and he knew my name!”*

“Well, Will,” his mother replied slowly, measuring each word. “That would have been my brother Emory. He’s your uncle. Now wash up for lunch.”

The crash was reported in the local papers, but the details about little Will were later recorded for posterity and hidden away in a box by his big sister, Mildred, who had walked home from the Pine Street School that day like a good third-grader, while Will dashed off to see what all the commotion was about. Mildred’s and Wilfred’s mother was Annie, Emory’s little white-skinned sister, who had been adopted by a white couple when she was two years old. Annie had recently moved to a lovely home in Selinsgrove with her children and husband, William Frick Groce, the owner of the new Groce Silk Mill on Sassafras Street. By 1914, five of Annie’s and Will’s six children had been born. Their fourth child, three-year-old Warren, would one day be my father.

“Some closet doors are better left unopened,” Dad had replied slowly, an edge to his voice, when I asked him many years later to tell me about his side of the family. Now if he had casually answered, “My family was incredibly boring, Mary dear, so there’s really nothing to tell,” then maybe I would have run outside to play and slammed the door on the whole issue. But a seed had been sown…

Then one summer evening in 2004, after my grandparents and parents had all passed away, I sat on my cousin Aileen’s living room floor helping her go through piles and boxes of records that her late grandmother, my Aunt Mildred (my father’s only sister), had saved. I was thrilled when Aileen had called, asking me to visit her in Selinsgrove to help her sort through this mess; and, despite my fifty-something years, I felt like a kid in a toy store. I had begun exploring my heritage, searching for reasons, sensing that secrets had been carefully kept, and now I reached for a thin, worn, faded white box with the words “Mildred’s relatives on Mother’s side” handwritten on the top. By now I knew that my father’s mother, born Annie Malick, had been adopted when she was two years old by the McCormicks in nearby Danville. I figured little Annie had been the child of an unwed teenager who realized she just couldn’t manage to keep her apple-cheeked toddler, so tearfully put her up for adoption. But no, it seems Grandma had siblings. Inside the box I found a list of family members, plus some aerial photos, including one with “Philadelphia Airport” written in bold white letters across the roof of a barn, and other photos, too, of ancient-looking airplanes, with a few vintage autos, and wide-open fields all around. Then, gingerly, I lifted out a fragile sheet of paper, a letterhead for “Emory C. Malick, Licensee: Pilot No. 105,” with a Philadelphia address and a small photo of a young man wearing a cap and holding the steering wheel in his open-air cockpit. He was looking deep into my eyes. I stared back at his handsome face while trying to process what I was seeing.

“Aileen,” I tried to say. No voice came out. “Aileen,” I tried again. “Have you ever seen this picture of our Uncle Emory?”

“Hmm?” she responded, casually reaching out for the sheet of paper, while concentrating on an article she was reading about some other relative. Slowly she moved her gaze over to the letterhead I had handed to her.

Pause.

“Oh my *Gawd!*” she yelped. “He’s *Black!*”

“Yup,” I agreed. It looked like we had finally stumbled onto the deepest, darkest secret of all. Neither of us had ever been told about our pioneer uncle, or about our African heritage. Annie and her children and grandchildren looked white enough that we never really questioned our race. However, in spite of long years of tight-lipped silence, Aunt Mildred had saved quite a bit of information about Emory, as had my father and their brother, Homer, and some other cousins I’ve since discovered, and, especially, my grandmother Annie, Emory’s sister. They could have thrown it all away, and Emory’s legacy could have disappeared forever. But, even though they shunned him during his lifetime, they saved his story, the story of a man, of a family and of a society; and now, at long last, it’s time for this story to be told.

Soon after discovering Emory’s existence, I began compiling an ever-expanding album of information about him, which I’ve been sharing with all who will listen, including several historical societies, the African American Museum of Philadelphia, the Blockson Library at Temple University, the Tuskegee Airmen (African American pilots who flew heroically for the United States during World War II), San Diego Air & Space Archives, the Curtiss Museum in Hammondsport, NY, and the Smithsonian Institution, whose *Air & Space Magazine* interviewed me and published an article entitled “The Unrecognized First” in their March 2011 issue.

The biography I’m writing, *Hidden Hero: Emory Conrad Malick (1881-1958), Pioneer in Aviation,* promises to be, by definition, a ground-breaking book in the African American community as well as among American history and aviation history aficionados. Also, since heretofore Emory C. Malick has been virtually unknown as either an “Early Bird” or as a significant black pioneer, his biography may well become required reading for students of all ages. Beyond these target groups, Mr. Malick’s biography will be especially significant to those who celebrate the opening of “closet” doors, the repudiation of racism, the bridging of cultures within our own society, and the enduring power and indomitable beauty of the human spirit.

While working on *Hidden Hero,* I am continuing to sift through information left by the Malick family. I will also continue to interview relatives of Emory as well as relatives of other pioneer pilots, including his classmates from the Curtiss Aviation School. With the ongoing help and encouragement of the Buehl family, I will persist in my research of Emory’s work with—and co-ownership of—the Flying Dutchman Air Service in Philadelphia—proving his connection with Ernie Buehl, a former German pilot who was noted for teaching, hiring, and encouraging black pilots, including “Chief” Charles Alfred Anderson, who, after impressing Eleanor Roosevelt with his flying skills, thereby convincing her, and therefore her husband, that black people could fly for the U.S.A. during World War II, went on to train many of those Tuskegee Airmen. I am also expanding upon the documentation of Emory’s work as an aerial photographer with the Aero Service Corporation and Dallin Aerial Surveys. In other words, I’m busy repudiating the dire statement of a very elderly white retired Air Force pilot: “Hey, your uncle was an out-of-towner and he was black. Of *course* no one saved any record of him!”

Concurrently, I am studying race relations in the United States during Emory’s lifetime, including the 1918 riots in Philadelphia (also, incidentally, the Spanish flu epidemic, which killed Emory’s sister Cora), and the extensive Ku Klux Klan activity in central Pennsylvania (where, even today, I’ve become a pariah to many Snyder Countians, including some family members, for daring to broach the subject of our mixed race).

In *Hidden Hero,* I begin by telling the tale of Emory’s maiden flights over Selinsgrove, then tracking his life from birth and before (following the Malick line back to Winningen, Germany, in the early 1500’s), through his early childhood, and continuing onward, describing his work as a carpenter and master tile-layer, to his retirement from the sky in 1928, after a tragic accident near Woodbury, NJ, in which Emory was seriously injured and his passenger was killed. Due to his eye injuries, his pilot’s license was revoked. Earlier the same year, Emory had been the pilot in another accident in Camden, NJ, where his engine “cronked,” (died) during an air show, but, because of his “skill and heroism,” no one was killed.

Now that he was grounded and his dreams were dashed, Emory had to call it quits, quipping, “I had my fun, and now I’m done.”

Included, too, is the sad tale of Emory’s attendance at the dedication, also in 1928, of the Sunbury Airport, and the article hidden in obscurity deep within the local newspaper proclaiming that the man who should have been honored above all others was Emory C. Malick, the first to fly over the city, whereas the airport was dedicated instead to Wesley Smith (an out-of-towner), and Emory was completely ignored, even though the engine from his first flight was on display. He had transported it from his father’s cellar for the occasion.

And I carry the story through to the bitter end, when Emory was found unconscious on a Philadelphia sidewalk in late December, 1958, and taken to Hahnemann Hospital, where he died. He lay in the morgue for a month, until the FBI located his sister Annie through a Christmas card she had sent him. She came to identify his body, and had him buried next to their mother Susanna in Wolf’s Crossroads cemetery, near their birthplace (needless to say, I wasn’t at the funeral. No one told me I had lost my great uncle, or that I even *had* a great uncle. I was clueless. I was busy being a nine-year-old white girl).

In spite of Emory’s forced early retirement, possibly caused by sabotage, and in spite of the fact that he was ignored and shunned by his peers—and even by members of his own family—he had already made history.

So finally, after all these years, the time has come to honor and to celebrate Emory Conrad Malick, Pioneer of Flight, and the Father, or Grandfather, of Black Aviation!

*Mary Groce*