

Amelia Earhart

*By Liz Gibbons*

The aviatrix, Amelia Earhart is a woman I have long admired. When my brother and I were clearing out my Dad's study at my parents' home after he died, we found a picture of him with Amelia Earhart. I asked my Mother what she knew about it, and she filled me in a bit. I learned more details later in a book on the life of Amelia.

In 1934 Edward Elliott was President of Purdue University. While he looked conservative, he was not. He believed that women should be prepared to have a life outside the home, an unusual viewpoint for that time. President Elliott gave a speech in the fall of 1934 at a meeting of the Conference on Current Problems sponsored by *The New York Herald Tribune*. The following speaker related how the Girl Scouts of America were preparing women to be good wives, exactly what he did not want to hear. He wanted to slip out but decided to wait and listen to the personable woman seated on his right. It was Amelia who spoke about the future of women in aviation and the difficulties they were facing in getting positions. It was just what Elliott wanted to hear as he was interested in flying. Through his guidance Purdue had recently built the first airport owned by a college and added aeronautics to the curriculum. He had also been the impetus behind the first women's residence hall which had opened in the fall of 1934. Elliott knew that to fulfill his vision to effectively educate women he had to change the climate at Purdue. He realized he needed new role models for woman, and here he was listening to the ultimate role model.

He approached Amelia with his ideas, and she said she would like to come to Purdue, but in what role, as she was not qualified to be a teacher and had no degree. Three weeks later she was at Purdue addressing a conference on Women's Work and Opportunities. However, it took until late spring the following year for Elliott to work out specific plans for Amelia. She was on campus as her schedule permitted. She gave talks at the Memorial Union Building in the afternoons for coeds. She advised them to not get married right after college. Many of the men students did not like her advice and her advocating independence. She also spoke in some classrooms, and I believe that was the occasion for the picture of her with my Dad and students in his biology lab. She stayed at a suite in the new woman's residence hall, so the coeds had many opportunities to interact with her.

There was a lot of resistance to Amelia from the deans and many of the professors in the various engineering departments. Even the wives of many of these faculty members were against her. One of the wives reported that she was mortified when saw Amelia stroll into Bartlett's Drug Store in slacks, unescorted, and sit at the soda fountain and order a soft drink. It was also reported that she was seen smoking.

Like many girls growing up in the 1930s and 40s I was taught to be nice, to be submissive and don't "rock the boat." In contrast, Amelia was a woman who had courage and vision, who followed her own dreams, and was not concerned about what people thought of her. She is remembered not only for her achievements in aviation but also for lifting the barriers that were restricting women.

