



**KATHERINE STINSON OTERO
HIGH FLYER**

The dark-eyed girl flew through the air, her thick hair blowing in the wind. “You’re flying, Katherine!” shouted her younger sister Marjorie, who was pushing Katherine on the swing behind their house in Canton, Mississippi. The year was 1907.

“My turn next,” Marjorie called out.

The girls were still in school, and their dreams of flight were as distant as the birds soaring above them.



One day, Katherine flew in a magnificent hot-air balloon. When she landed, she told her family, “ I want to learn to fly!”

“I want to learn too!” Marjorie chimed in.

Their mother, Emma Stinson, read everything she could about the inventive Wright Brothers, who had flown an airplane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, in 1903. She loved the idea of flying.

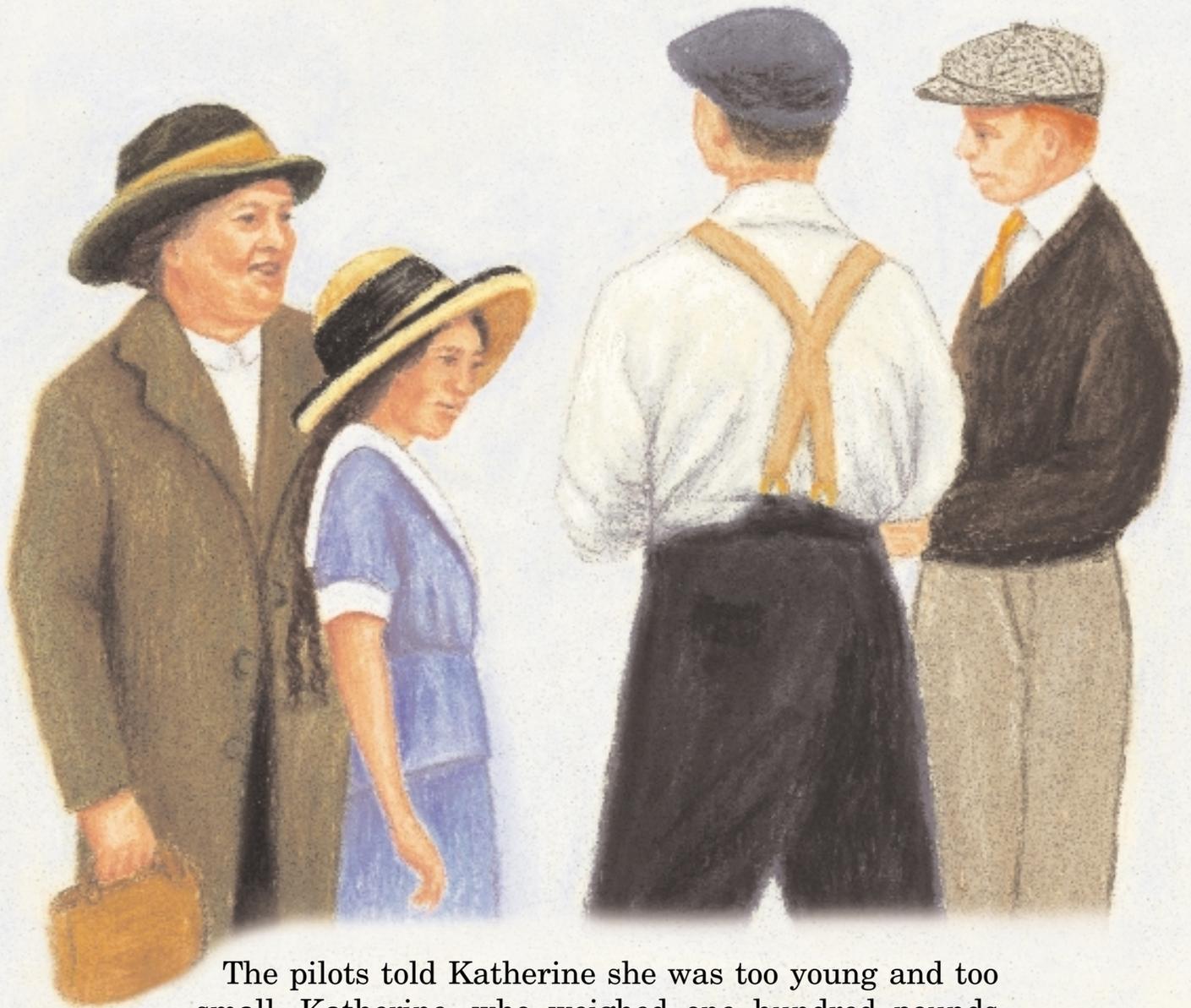
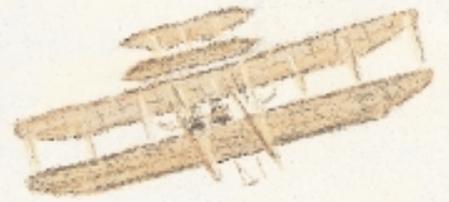


A few years later, Katherine and her mother visited a flying field and watched the Wright Flyers, the airplanes the Wright Brothers invented, circling above.

“Will they teach me to fly, Mama?”

“We’ll see,” said her mother.

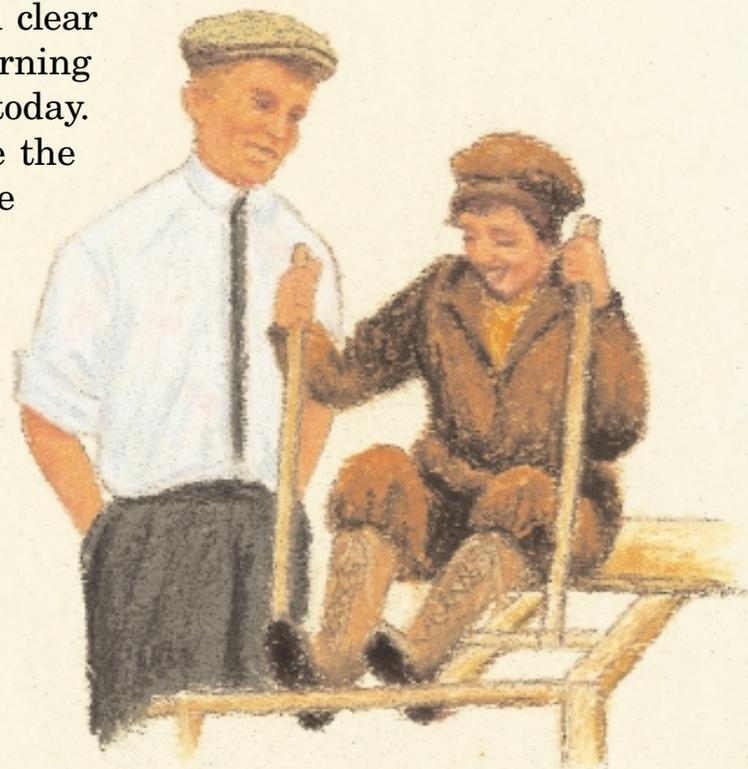
Katherine had raised the money for flying lessons herself, selling a piano she had won in a popularity contest.

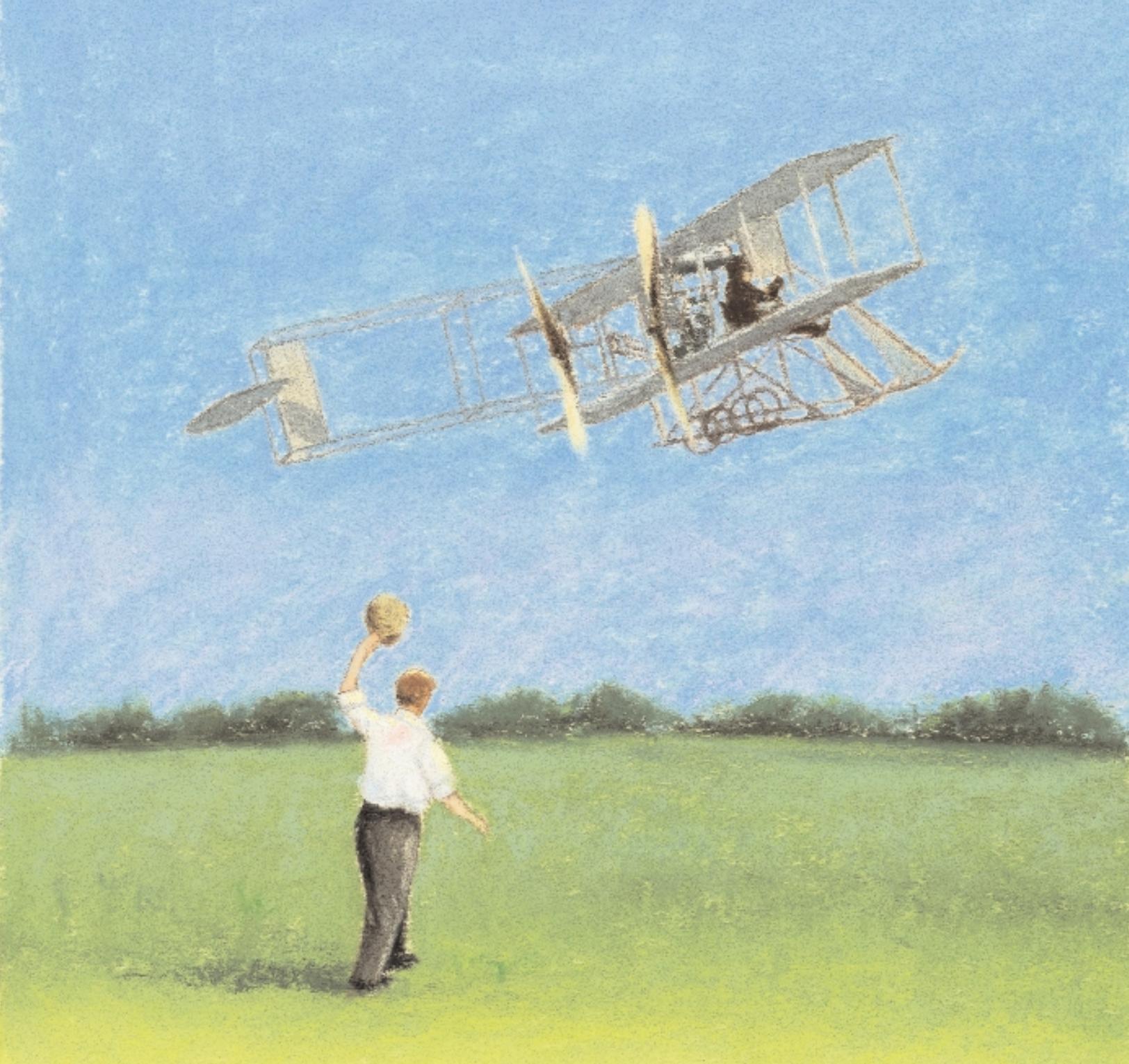


The pilots told Katherine she was too young and too small. Katherine, who weighed one hundred pounds and stood five feet tall, told them that flying relied not on strength alone but on physical and mental coordination too. They still said no. But Katherine and her mother did not give up. They spoke to many flying teachers; usually they got the same answer.

Eventually, Katherine and her mother met Max Lillie, a gentle giant who was a well-known pilot from Sweden. At first, Max told Katherine no, but she did not give up. Finally he said yes. At last, she was going to fly! Katherine was beginning the greatest adventure of her life.

The morning of July 13, 1912, dawned clear and sunny, fine weather for flying. Learning to fly was very different than it is today. The student pilot first learned to guide the airplane with simple sticks. If the student didn't fall off, he or she could learn to fly. To teach Katherine, Max set up two sawhorses with two sticks attached to two levers below. Then he moved the sawhorses, and Katherine operated the levers to control the "airplane" and keep it balanced.





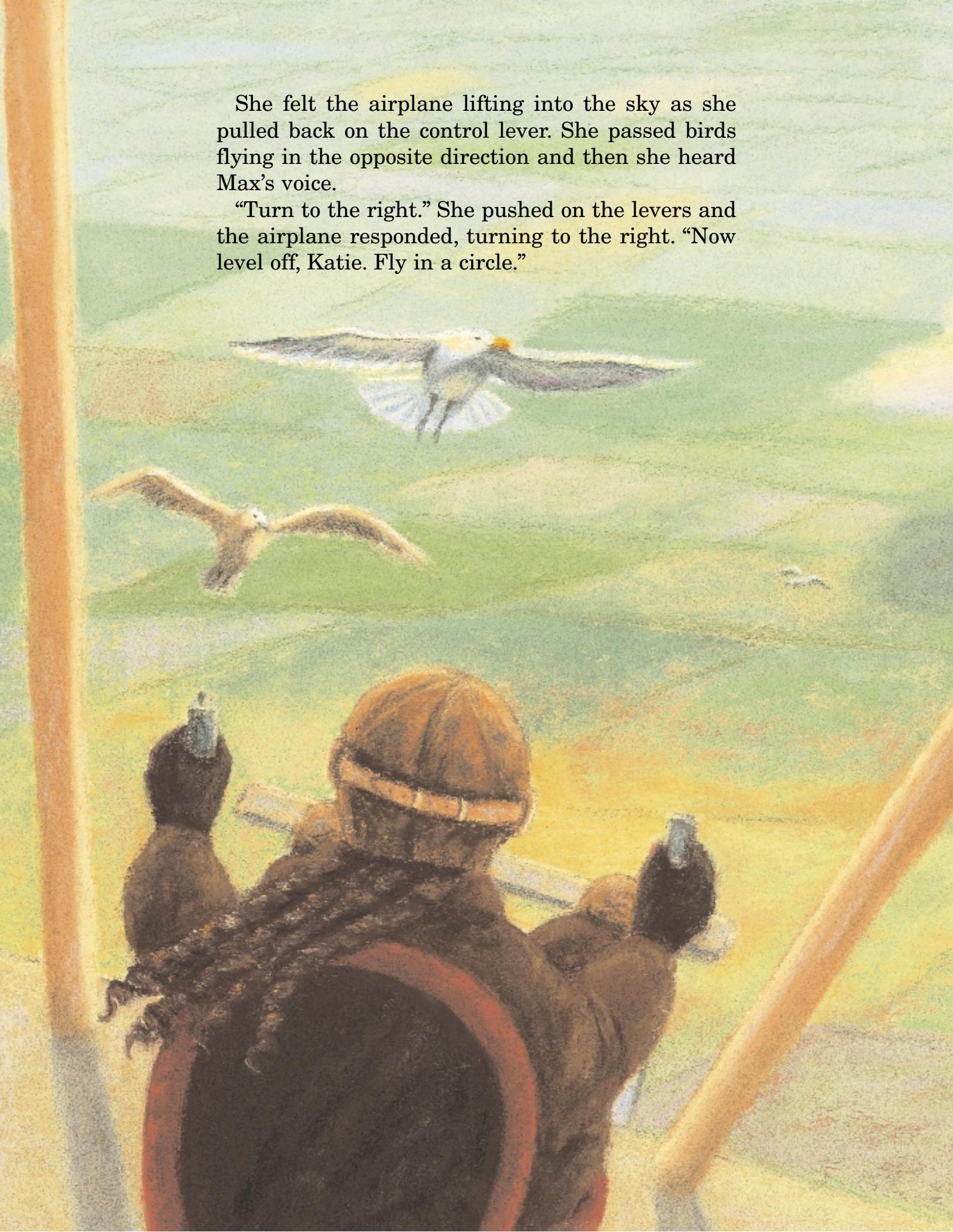
Max took her flying and showed her how the airplane worked. Katherine did everything Max said. She was a good student. Finally, he announced, "You're ready to solo!"

Max repeated his instructions. "Aim the airplane into the wind and pull back. That pulls the nose up and your airplane will lift into the sky. Keep it steady," said Max. "That enables you to fly straight and level."

Max waved his cap at Katherine. "Go, Katie, go!" She began her takeoff. She could hardly believe it. She was flying alone!

She felt the airplane lifting into the sky as she pulled back on the control lever. She passed birds flying in the opposite direction and then she heard Max's voice.

"Turn to the right." She pushed on the levers and the airplane responded, turning to the right. "Now level off, Katie. Fly in a circle."

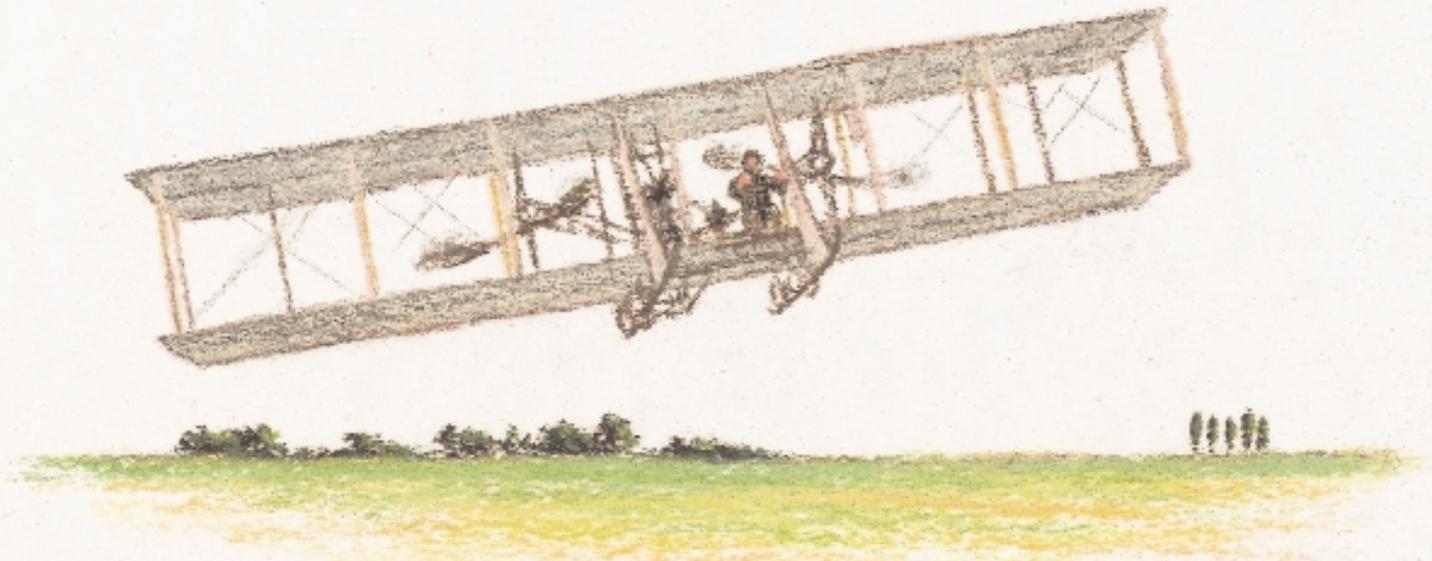




Katherine was three hundred feet in the air. Higher and higher she flew, until she was five hundred feet in the air.

“I’m flying! Look at the clouds! Look at the birds!” she shouted.

“Don’t look down!” yelled Max.

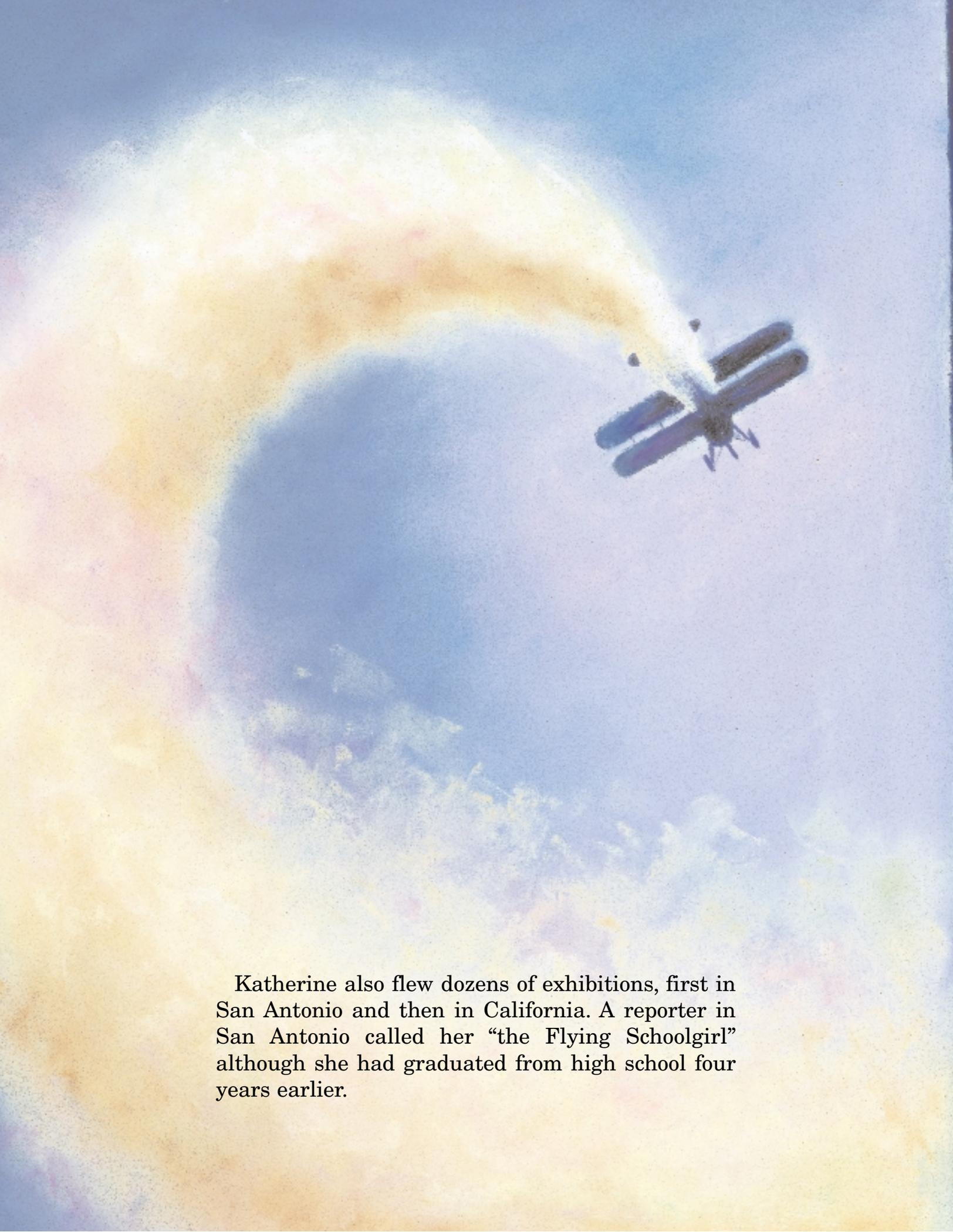


“Bring it down, Katie. Push on the levers. Easy does it.”
Katherine landed the plane on the grassy field, bouncing to a halt on the craft’s small bicycle tires. She smiled. “I did it!”
Max said, “You’re the best student I have.”
That day, Katherine, nearly twenty-one years old, became only the fourth American woman licensed to fly.



Mrs. Stinson decided to open a flying school in San Antonio, Texas, near Fort Sam Houston, a U.S. Army base. Her daughter Marjorie had learned to fly soon after Katherine, and the two Stinson girls would instruct students. Their teacher, Max Lillie, joined them. Younger brothers Eddie and Jack would learn to fly as soon as they were old enough.





Katherine also flew dozens of exhibitions, first in San Antonio and then in California. A reporter in San Antonio called her “the Flying Schoolgirl” although she had graduated from high school four years earlier.



She flew the first loop-the-loop at an air show in California. She wrote *CAL* for California as well as her initials in the sky with flares and smoke. The crowds loved the young flyer.

