

## News &gt; Local

# Evelyn Sharp remembered in library program

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The Evelyn Sharp of history books is a pioneering Nebraska aviatrix from Ord.

To Irene Abernethy, Evelyn Sharp was her older sister's good friend, a member of the Ord school band, an outstanding high school athlete, a girl who loved horses and a person who took her on plane rides around the small town of Ord.

As a result, Abernethy was able to provide a living history to a crowd of between 50 and 60 people who came to the city library Tuesday afternoon to hear a presentation given as part of Women's History Month, which is celebrated each March.

But Abernethy was not the only person in the room who had personal memories of Sharp. One man got to share his story of how he and his siblings met Sharp one day and each got to ride in her plane for the price of a quarter.

While Sharp's name is associated with Ord almost as much as it is with airplanes, she was not born in Nebraska. Instead, Abernethy said, Sharp was born on Oct. 1, 1919 in Montana to a young married couple. When that couple divorced, the mother decided to give Evelyn up for adoption.

Evelyn was adopted by Mary and John Sharp, who were not able to have their own children. Abernethy said the Sharps allowed Evelyn to see her biological mother, whom she originally only knew as "Aunt Elsie." However, the Sharps eventually revealed to Evelyn that she was adopted and she also got the opportunity to



Irene Abernethy of Grand Island speaks about Evelyn Sharp at a Women's History Month program Tuesday at Grand Island Public Library. (Independent/Harold Reutter)

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spend time with her biological mother after that revelation.

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During Evelyn's earliest childhood, she lived with her parents in Hastings. Abernethy said that it was during her time in Hastings that Evelyn was heard to say, "I want to drive an airplane."

The Sharps later moved to Ericson, where Evelyn attended a rural school, Abernethy said. Evelyn rode a pony to school and Abernethy noted that she often owned a horse as she was growing up.

"Evelyn loved horses," Abernethy said.

When the Sharps lived in Ord, they had a rooming house and a cafe. Abernethy said that Evelyn would hitch her horse to a wagon and then drive around town to sell ice cream. "I remember buying from her," she said.

Abernethy said that one of the boarders in John Sharp's rooming house was a Broken Bow pilot who used to come to Ord to give flying lessons. When that boarder got behind on his rent, he suggested he could pay his debt to John Sharp by giving flying lessons to Evelyn.

Abernethy said that Evelyn was an excellent student, who soloed when she was just 16 and had earned her private pilot's license by age 17. Sharp earned her commercial pilot's license at 18. By age 20, she was a certified flight instructor.

She flew mail from Ord to Grand Island, Abernethy said. She also was the first pilot to land at Arrasmith Field in Grand Island.

John Sharp was never successful as a business person, but he wanted to see his daughter get her own plane, Abernethy said. He eventually ended up talking to Abernethy's father, Glen Auble, and her father's brother. As a result of John Sharp's entreaty, numerous Ord businessmen helped make the down payment on a 1937 Taylor Club. Abernethy recalled a dance being part of a fundraiser for the plane, with her uncle, a jeweler, donating a diamond as a door prize.

Evelyn helped pay for the plane by becoming a barnstormer who flew to various Nebraska towns, promising to give people rides if they paid a fee, said Abernethy, who let people in the audience pass around an orange ticket from one of Sharp's barnstorming events. During her barnstorming days, Sharp gave at least 5,000 people rides.

As a younger friend, Abernethy said, she got to ride in Sharp's plane with Evelyn, but also with Evelyn's dog.

Abernethy said her older sister and Evelyn were in Camp Fire Girls together, played on the same soccer team in gym class, were in the school glee club and also were in band. She said Evelyn was a saxophone player in band, as well as a piano player. During the fall, Evelyn hunted pheasants.

"She was the best female athlete at Ord," said Abernethy, who said Evelyn Sharp would have excelled at interscholastic athletics had such competition been allowed for girls in the 1930s.

She said she can recall a couple of reasons being given for the lack of interscholastic competition for girls, including the fact that girls basketball was at that time limited to half-court play. "They thought girls couldn't run up and down a full court," said Abernethy, eliciting a burst of laughter from audience members.

She said the ban on girls athletics also was justified on the grounds that "girls might cry, if things didn't exactly go right."

While Sharp's activities might have been limited when it came to athletics, her horizons kept expanding when it came to flying. Abernethy said Evelyn taught 354 men in the U.S. Army – the U.S. Air Force did not exist as a separate branch of the service then – during World War II.

She then became one of a number of women pilots who flew bombers and other military aircraft from manufacturing plants to locations all over the United States, Abernethy said. Sharp and the other female pilots

flew planes to their intended destinations, then returned by bus or train to California.

Abernethy said Evelyn died when an engine failed and blew up during an attempted take-off from an airfield in Pennsylvania.

Evelyn Sharp's life story has been memorialized in several ways. Abernethy said former schoolteacher Diane Bartels, a pilot herself, flew into Ord for an air show, giving her the opportunity to meet Abernethy's father, who showed the teacher various materials about Evelyn's life.

Bartels researched Sharp's life and eventually published a biography titled "Sharpie: The Life Story of Evelyn Sharp – Nebraska's Aviatix." Because of her biography, Bartels went to Washington, D.C., in 2010 to receive a Congressional Gold Medal awarded posthumously to Sharp for her service to country during World War II. The ceremony, attended by many other WASPS or next-of-kin, awarded medals and recognized numerous other women who served as members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots or WASPs.

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