

The Registry

October/November 2022
Copyright © 2022 Ferret Research, Inc.

Reviving the stories of historic female managers and entrepreneurs

Flown in Fresh Every Day

Delivering goods by air. Mildred Johnson saw real possibilities for such a service. Not for standard goods, but for ones that were highly perishable or that people wanted immediately.

Most people would think twice about starting such a service in the middle of the depression. Johnson, too, probably thought twice. But she was not deterred. The airline industry, about twenty years old, was growing. She'd worked in it and at its margins for nearly a decade. Even in difficult economic times, there were individuals and businesses who would pay to have items shipped overnight on the Ford Trimotors and DC-2 aircraft flying between major cities. This was the market that Johnson went after.

She started in 1933 by printing up brochures and distributing them to airports. They explained that Johnson's business, Air Shopping Service, would arrange to fill orders for perishable goods like foods or flowers, or items wanted in a hurry—provided these were within reach of an airline. She positioned her service as helping the client solve a problem, like getting delicate Florida orange blossoms to Chicago for a wedding, or a designer gown from a Fifth Avenue shop to Rochester, Minnesota for an evening soiree.

She made it seem relatively simple; it was not. When an order came in, Johnson sourced the item, arranged to have it packaged, transported to the nearest airport, flown to the airport nearest the customer or addressee, and delivered, usually the next day (although for the gown going to Minnesota, it was delivered the same day). She used the telephone and telegrams to communicate and access the specialized knowledge she needed: weather forecasts, governments' import and export restrictions, customs duties, airline routes and schedules, and vendors.

Her most important resource, however, was the network of agents and contacts she developed, many of them airline employees. If Johnson didn't know who sold orange blossoms or Texas horny toads (wanted by an indulgent aunt for her nephew's birthday), she knew someone who knew. Her agents also saw that the merchandise got on the planes.

Johnson saw another opportunity: supplying perishable food and flowers to restaurants and clubs in her home city, New York. The Stork Club, one of Manhattan's most prestigious nightspots with its clientele of movie and theatrical stars, aristocrats, and celebrities, was an early client. At the manager's request, Johnson had twenty

continued on p. 2

The Registry is researched, written, & produced by Mary Goljenboom.

E-mail comments to MaryG@ferretresearch.com

If you do not wish to receive these mailings, please email me (above) and I will remove you from the list. This list is not shared.



Collection of Ferret Research

Mildred Johnson c. 1936.

Ledger October

Oct. 1, 1979

Dorothy Arzner dies. Arzner was an early film director and the first woman to join the Directors Guild of America.

Oct. 8, 1979

Edith Spurlock Sampson dies. Born Oct. 13, 1901, Sampson was a lawyer, diplomat, and the first Black female judge in Illinois.

Oct. 13, 2020

Jacqueline Davis Baird dies. Baird and her twin sister, **Gillian Davis Mitchell**, co-founded a swimsuit design and manufacturing firm, The Twins, Inc., in the early 1960s. Baird was president and Mitchell, treasurer. By 1986, their company's 135 employees produced 1,200 suits daily.

Oct. 17, 1975

Florentine Goodrich Carson dies. After Goodrich Carson became a certified pub-

lic accountant, she worked for Reo Motor Car Co., was comptroller for Long Island University, and treasurer of Tennessee Valley Authority. Forced to leave her TVA job in 1936 when she married, she joined her husband's home-building business as secretary-treasurer.

Oct. 23, 1881

Adelina "Nina" Otero-Warren is born. She was superintendent of public schools for Santa Fe County, NM from 1917 to 1929.

Oct. 26, 1897

Mildred Johnson is born. In the 1930s, Johnson started a shopping and delivery service that utilized commercial airlines to get perishable foods and flowers, gifts, and goods to customers.

Oct. 30, 1934

Nobia Franklin dies. Franklin created a beauty salon in her home in San Antonio then expanded it to include hair care products and cosmetics, plus a beauty school. Franklin moved her business to Fort Worth then Houston before settling in Chicago

continued on p. 2

Flown in Fresh Every Day *continued*

pounds of stone crabs flown from Bimini, Bahamas. They were so popular that the club gave Johnson a standing order. On the menu was a note saying that they'd been flown in fresh that day, which impressed the clientele. Johnson continued providing the club with them for years and added other provisions.

In 1936, her business got a big break when she teamed with Railway Express Agency (REA). The agency, jointly operated by the US railroads, handled their express deliveries from 215 offices around the US. They had recently been selected to do the same for all the US airlines. REA and Johnson's businesses complimented one another. Instead of contacting Johnson directly in New York City, customers telephoned their local railway express office with their orders. These were dispatched to Johnson who arranged fulfillment. REA handled pick-up and delivery. In addition to the cost of the item, customers paid \$1 (about \$20 in today's money) for the first pound and fifteen cents (about \$3) for each additional pound. The partnership seems to have lasted no more than a year. It was financially successful for Johnson who filled 7,622 orders and added new customers and offerings.

Over the next few years, she traveled regularly to find the exotic foodstuffs and flowers that appealed to both her corporate and individual customers and the decorative items, silver, jewels, perfume, luggage, fashions, and unusual gifts that individuals looked to her for. She also shored up supplies of favorites.

In Colombia, she secured wild orchids at fifteen cents per dozen. A single orchid sold in New York cost between one and five dollars. Johnson arranged to have flowers shipped to New York three times per week. She charged her retail customers \$6.50 for four, easily covering the flight costs, duties, and earning her a profit.

From Hawaii, she added fresh leis, pineapple, and Hawaiian gift baskets containing Kona coffee, poha jam, pickled pineapple, and other treats. Buffalo steaks, assorted Quebec cheeses, a smoked fish from Winnipeg called the goldeye, and hand-loomed scarves were imported from Canada. Hand-made silver ornaments came from the Andes.

Her trade trips were not just for importing goods. She was also looking for customers interested in American products. Fashions and cosmetics were popular items for her non-American consumers.

To highlight the glamor and prestige of her offerings, Johnson fastened what she called a flight log to retail purchases. It listed all the transportation details. For instance, Mrs. Emily Parcher, who was a gardener and garden lecturer, received two orchids on Christmas morning 1938. Air Shopping Service's flight log showed that the flowers left Medellin, Colombia on December 20, and arrived at Metropolitan Airport, Newark, NJ at 5:40 AM on December 22 aboard Eastern Air Lines' Miami Flyer. Elapsed flying time: 20 hours, 55 minutes. When they were delivered to the Parcher home in West Newton, Mass., they were described as "fresh and beautiful."

Emily Parcher's orchids were purchased through a partnership Johnson made with *Town & Country* magazine during the winter holidays. Johnson established similar joint ventures with department stores like Lord & Taylor, Blum's (Philadelphia), and Dayton's (Minneapolis).

After World War II, she added a subscription-based model to her retail business. Launched in 1952, the Air Shopping Club sent members a surprise gift each month. The \$25 membership fee also enabled members to order goods from the catalog.

Mildred Johnson operated Air Shopping Service for nearly thirty years, demonstrating that humans' desire for immediate gratification combined with the quick delivery of goods was a viable business model. The path that she charted lands at Amazon.com.

--Mary Goljenboom

in 1922. In 1927, with her daughter, she formed the N. A. Franklin Association of Beauty Culture.

November

Nov. 3, 2019

Gertrude "Gert" Boyle dies. Boyle was president and chairwoman of Columbia Sportswear Co. and the face of its popular *One Tough Mother* advertising campaign. In 1970, at the death of her husband, she and her college-age son took the small, indebted company over and built it into a top national brand.

Nov. 6, 1795

Micaela Almonester de Pontalba is born. She built the Pontalba Buildings in her native New Orleans.

Nov. 13, 1910

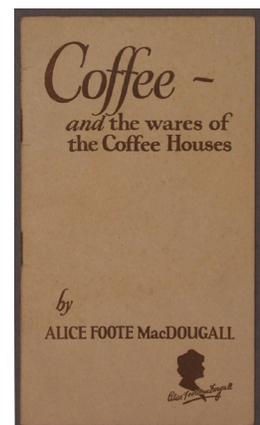
Honor Gregory House is born. She founded her own advertising agency in Cleveland in the late 1930s and led it for decades.

Nov. 15, 1915

The **Anita Bush Players**, also called the Anita Bush All-Colored Dramatic Stock Company, opened at the Lincoln Theater in Harlem with the play "The Girl at the Fort."

Nov. 21, 1959

Elizabeth Burchenal dies. Burchenal was an authority on folk dancing and founded and managed the American Folk Dance Society and the National Committee of Folk Arts. She also directed the Folk Arts Center in New York City



Nov. 23, 1907

Alice Foote MacDougall sets herself up in business as a coffee merchant selling her own special blend.