

The FAA History Detective: In Search of the First Hispanic Air Traffic Controller

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To celebrate National Hispanic Heritage Month (celebrated from September 15 through October 15), FAA's historian went in search of the first Hispanic air traffic controller. This is the story of her search . . .

Who was the first Hispanic air traffic controller? Historical research can often be tricky and sometimes confusing and/or frustrating since documentation can be inaccurate, missing, or incomplete. Identifying the first Hispanic controller, for example, proved to be a lesson in perseverance, since imperfect documentation required piecing together vague parts of a historical puzzle using census records and newspaper articles.

FAA's small history archives had no documentation on the first Hispanic controller, which meant research began by making an educated (or lucky) guess. In examining the original list of controllers hired by the federal government in 1936, a few names stood out for further examination. One in particular, L. Ponton de Arce, seemed worthy of investigation. The first step was to determine whether Ponton de Arce was of Hispanic descent. An internet search provided a first name for this early controller, Leroy. Although Columbia University did an oral history with him in 1960 (a 23-page transcript is available at the University), and the University of Wyoming holds 18 boxes of his personal papers, this material is not online and, hence, unavailable unless one can visit the repositories. As a result, research would have to rely on Internet sources and secondary sources.

Discovering Heritage

Since the online University of Wyoming finding aid for the Ponton de Arce papers estimated Leroy's birth date as 1899 or 1900, the U.S. Census proved a good place to start research. According to the 1900 U.S. Census, Stanley Ponton de Arce, a San Francisco salesman had two sons, Stanley Jr. born in 1896 and Leroy born on March 22, 1899. The census record showed that Stanley Sr. was born in France in 1861 and listed both of his parents as also being born in France. The census listed his wife, Jessie, as born in California and listed both of her parents as being born in England.

The 1920 census included a listing for Jessie Ponton de Arce in San Francisco with her two sons Stanley and Leroy, but did not list a male head of household. It simply identified the place of birth of the boys' father as unknown. Since early enumerators sometimes had trouble with the spelling of surnames, a recheck of the 1920 census found a Stanley Rice, a salesman, married to Mignonne and living in San Francisco. It listed his father and mother as being born in Spain (not France). It did not list any children for the couple. The 1930 census identified them as "Mignon De Arcy" and "Stanly P De Arcy." Again, no children were

listed. Could this be the father of Leroy, the air traffic controller? If so, what happened to his mother Jessie and who was Mignonne?

So, it's back to the Internet. An article in the July 23, 1904, *San Francisco Call*, included a short piece announcing that Jessie Ponton de Arce had filed for divorce from her husband Stanley (after 8 years of marriage). The article stated that, "Improper letters from women, who signed only their Christian names to the clandestine correspondence, form the basis of a suit for divorce." A subsequent edition of the newspaper noted that a judge had granted the divorce, and Jessie got custody of their two sons and \$90 a month in alimony. Stanley must have then married Mignonne.

A 1934 San Francisco death certificate found on ancestry.com for a Stanley Camillo Ponton de Arce lists his wife as Mignonne and his two sons as Stanley and Leroy, so this must be Stanley Sr. The death certificate, however, indicated that his father, Camillo Ponton de Arce, was Spanish, and his mother Elodie Hahn was American, born in New Orleans. The 1900 Census, however, had indicated Stanley and his parents were born in France. Which documents are correct – could there be a political explanation for the discrepancies? In 1900, when Stanley Sr. claimed to be French in the census, the Spanish-American War was still fresh in the minds of most Americans and anti-Spanish sentiment still strong. Perhaps he did not want to identify himself as Spanish.

To figure this out, it is back to the census records to search for Elodie and Camillo. The 1860 census includes an Elodie Ponton de Arce, who was living with her parents John and Marie Antoinette Hahn in San Francisco. The record listed her birth place as New Orleans. This must be Stanley Sr.'s mother and Leroy's grandmother. But, the census listed her husband as Lucas (not Camillo) Ponton de Arce. The census showed Lucas' birthplace as Cuba, then a Spanish colony. It showed that Lucas' mother was born in Mexico and his father in Cuba. He immigrated to San Francisco in 1854. Elodie and Lucas had four children: Stanislaus (Stanley), Marie, Inez, and Edgar. The family was well known in San Francisco social circles. The local press often printed information on Lucas, a successful businessman, and his family.

But, if Lucas is really Stanley Sr.'s father, who is Camillo and why is he listed as Stanley Sr.'s father on the death certificate? Was there an error on the death certificate or in the census records? An article in the December 21, 1866, *Daily Alta California* listed Lucius [Lucas?] Ponton de Arce as the trustee of Camilo [sic] Stanislaus Ponton de Arce for Camillo's shares in a Nappa Valley winery. Could Camillo and Lucas be brothers, or maybe father and son? Did Camillo remain in Cuba while his brother or son took care of his U.S. business? No other information on Camillo could be found online.

Despite confusion over family names, it appears that Lucas, born in Cuba, is Stanley Sr.'s father, Stanley Sr. is Leroy's father. Hence, Leroy Ponton de Arce's

is of Spanish heritage. But, what do we know about Leroy other than the fact that the Department of Commerce's Aeronautics Branch hired him as one of the first federal air traffic controllers in 1936?

Learning about Leroy Ponton de Arce

The 1900 Census shows Leroy's age as 1, which indicates a birth year of 1899. The 1920 Census lists him as being 19, which would mean a birth year of 1900 (Census Day was January 1, 1920; Leroy would have turned 20 in March.) Leroy's 1917 World War I draft card lists his birth date as March 22, 1896. Why the discrepancy in birth years? Enumerators, or census takers, can and do make mistakes so the 1900 or 1920 census may have the date wrong. Or, Leroy may have misrepresented his birth year on his draft card so he could join the military. The Selective Service Act of 1917 required all males aged 21 to 30 to register for military service. If Leroy was born in 1899 per the 1900 census he would have only been 18 or 19 in 1917, and hence, too young to join the military.

Leroy's draft card notes that before he joined the U.S. Army Signal Corps, Aviation Section, he worked as an assistant auditor for a commercial business. He trained as an aviator at Wilbur Wright Field in Ohio and received his instruction from naval aviator H. J. Norton. During World War I he served in the U.S. Army Air Service in France, where he somehow gained the nickname "Bon Bon." He became a member of the Aero Club of America in 1918 while still in the service.

On December 30, 1919, the *Mexia (Texas) Evening News* reported what was probably Lieutenant Ponton de Arce's first aviation accident:

A girl and an aviator lie in a hospital here today recovering from injuries after the airplane had "dived" 200 feet to the earth. The girl, Miss Ola Willett a daughter of a manufacturer here, was taking the ride in a passenger-carrying plane piloted by Aviator L. Ponton de Arce.

The *Congressional Record* for the first session of the sixty-seventh Congress shows congressional approval for his promotion to second lieutenant in the U.S. Air Service in November 1921.

In 1922 or 1923, Leroy married San Antonio socialite Bonnibel Stowers, heir to a Texas department store chain and an expansive Texas cattle ranch. The San Antonio area papers covered the visits of Lieutenant and Mrs. Leroy Ponton De Arce to Texas. The marriage, however, was short-lived. On May 20, 1926, the *Kerrville (Texas) Mountain Sun* wrote that Bonnibel Mary Stowers and World War I ace Lieutenant John Sharpe Griffith had married; the paper made no mention of her first husband.

Leroy Ponce de Arce held a number of aviation-related jobs during the 1920s and 1930s. He piloted aircraft for Frisky Aircraft Corporation, Syd Chaplin Aircraft,

Old Colonial Airways Corporation, and Colonial Air Transport. He held contract Air Mail Pilot Certificate no. 100, issued in 1926. At the time of his 1926 application for his contract air mail pilot certificate he had logged approximately 1,000 hours.

In 1928, he managed operations at the Old Colony Airways Mueller Field in Revere, MA. While at Mueller Field, the *Montreal Gazette* (July 19, 1928) reported that an eight-year old boy “who never spoke a single word from the time of his birth,” could now speak thanks to an airplane ride he took with Captain Leroy Ponton de Arce. The boy’s doctor had recommended the child, “dumb from birth” be “subjected to some fright or thrill and suggested a ride in an airplane” to see if it would make him talk. According to the paper, for thirty minutes, Ponton de Arce “looped the loop, side-slipped, dived and soared over the field.” When the plane landed, the boy uttered three words, daddy, mother, and plane.

He made the news the previous year in Brunswick, NJ, when a number of newspapers across the country (e.g., *Daily Constitution* in Chillicothe, MO; *Evening Gazette* in Xenia, OH; *The Bee* in Danville, VA; *Waterloo Evening Courier* in Waterloo, IA; *Tyrone Daily Herald* in Tyrone, PA; *Chronicle Telegram* in Elyria, OH) reported in September that a 17-year old youth had hung onto the tail of Ponton de Arce’s plane as he flew to Hadley Field from Teterboro Airport. Unable to get his six-passenger Fokker in the air, Ponton de Arce had asked the boy to swing the tail around “so that it would point into the wind.” Instead of letting go after he pushed the plane around, the boy hung on for the entire 25-minute flight. The paper noted that during the flight “DeArce noticed that the plane wasn’t behaving properly . . . [and] resolved to have a thorough inspection at Hadley Field.” The boy suffered no injuries during his escape.

On June 8, 1929, Leroy Ponton de Arce piloted the first commercial passenger/air mail flight from Boston to New York for Colonial Air Transport (which later became American Airlines) in a Fokker trimotor. The flight is now celebrated as the founding of the American Airlines. He remained with the airline into the mid-1930s. In 1933 or 1934, Leroy married Helen C. Koch, the widow of Alfred Koch, Sr. (founder of Macy’s department stores). He had met her while working as a private pilot for her husband years earlier.

In December 1935, when a consortium of airlines, including American Airlines, established the first airway traffic control station in Newark, NJ, Ponton de Arce became one of the first two air traffic controllers hired. In an interview with the Long Beach, CA, *Independent* on February 26, 1963, Ponton de Arce reminisced that on December 25, 1935, in Newark he “was the only air traffic controller on duty anywhere in the world.” He recalled, “I remember sitting there in a little room under the tower, with a ham sandwich and a thermos of coffee, directing traffic.”

In 1936, when the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Air Commerce (later Civil Aviation Administration) took over the Newark station, as well as the ones in Chicago and Cleveland, it hired the station personnel. Hence, Ponton de Arce became one of the original federal corps of airway controllers. In 1937, he oversaw the establishment of the Oakland airway traffic station, and in 1939 he became the air traffic control coordinator for the Civil Aeronautics Authority's Sixth and Seventh Regions.

During World War II, like many of his CAA counterparts, he left the agency to serve in the U.S. Army Air Corps. He held several command posts, including Commanding Officer of the 7th Ferrying Group at Gore Field in Great Falls, Montana, and rose to the rank of Colonel. After the war, he returned to the CAA, and became the air traffic chief of the Sixth Region. He had a long career with the CAA, later FAA, retiring July 5, 1963, as the chief of the air traffic division in FAA's Western Region. Leroy Ponton de Arce died in 1967 in Los Angeles. His wife, Helen, died in 1981. The trustees of her estate established the de Arce-Koch memorial endowment fund at the University of Toledo.