

In the early 1930s, no one would sponsor Guthrie native James Herman Banning in his quest to be America's first black aviator to fly coast to coast. No one would lend him a plane. No one would allow him into flight school due to his race.

But with the help of his friend and mechanic, Thomas C. Allen, Banning gathered spare parts to assemble his own plane, then made the 3,300-mile flight from Los Angeles to Long Island, New York, in 1932.

Banning's story is told in an exhibit opening Feb. 4 at Rudisill Regional Library in Tulsa to help celebrate

Black History Month. *James Herman Banning Comes Alive* was created by Pat Smith and Louisa Jagger of a Broken Arrow-based nonprofit, The Greatest Story Never Told, and authors of *On Freedom's Wings: The Remarkable and Inspiring Story of James Herman Banning*. The three-

component educational project includes the Banning website, which has received more than 200,000 visits from educators and historians across the United States, as well as films and a traveling informational exhibition called *Fly With Banning*.

"Much of our history leaves out the significant contributions of African-Americans and other minorities," Smith says.

Smith found one article about Banning and, after much research, discovered more than 90 stories about

# A First in Flight

Exhibit honors Guthrie native James Banning, the first African-American cross-country aviator.



JAMES BANNING'S TRANSCONTINENTAL FLIGHT IS DOCUMENTED IN AN EXHIBITION AT RUDISILL REGIONAL LIBRARY. PHOTOS COURTESY THE GREATEST STORY NEVER TOLD

the pilot in African-American newspapers.

"He inspired millions and yet, because his story wasn't told in

the mainstream press, it was forgotten," she says. "Now, it is being told. His perseverance and determination can inspire millions of children today. Inspiration is a fundamental part of education. Louisa and I decided we wanted to tell these stories, these greatest stories never told."

Banning applied to African-American colleges, but none included the engineering curriculum that he sought. Eventually, he was accepted into Iowa State College, a traditionally white school. One of his roommates there was Frederick Douglass Patterson, who later founded the Tuskegee Airmen.

A friend taught Banning how to fly, and he later became a demonstration pilot on the West Coast. Eventually, Banning made the historic cross-country flight in 41 hours, 27 minutes aloft. In real time, counting stops for fuel, the trip took 21 days because he had to raise money for each leg of the trip. (The first transcontinental flight in 1911 took 49 days.)

Banning's glory quickly turned tragic. Four months after the historic flight, Banning died in a plane crash in which he was a passenger during a military base air show Feb. 5, 1933.

Each component of the Smith-Jagger exhibit is geared to help children explore achievements in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

"This exhibition can help us bring STEM topics to all children of low income and children of color," says Alice Latimer, Tulsa City County Library African-American Resource Center coordinator. "With Banning being an aviator with so many different skills, he is a great lesson for helping to open our children's minds to becoming aviators, engineers and scientists. STEM helps us get students up to date in computer technology and to increase their knowledge of math.

"For African-American children, Banning is an example of what success looks like from someone who looks like them. He was a man who graduated from the black high school in Guthrie. He played the violin, so he was well-rounded. This is a wonderful pattern of fortitude from this truly ingenious man, for our children to follow."

In addition to the book that they have written about Banning, Smith and Jagger have produced four short films on his life and achievements. For more information, visit the Banning exhibition website at [www.jameshermanbanning.org](http://www.jameshermanbanning.org).

■ TRACY LEGRAND